

# From Watching Newsreels to Making Videos

From filmstrips to documentaries to Hollywood movies, social studies teachers have a long tradition of using video in the classroom. In fact, some of the earliest films made were purposefully adapted for social studies instruction as photoplays depicting pivotal events in U.S. history.

A key difference between digital video and its predecessors is malleability. When working with digital video, teachers can start and stop, fast forward and rewind, freeze, edit, mash-up, or create new media far more easily than in any previous format. This flexibility makes digital video an important new tool for social studies.

Students can watch digital video that makes distant times or places more accessible. For example, when studying the Great Depression, students can watch selections from a period film such as *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Modern Times* to bring the issues and ideas of the time to life. For a unit on modern Brazil, excerpts from films such as *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*) or *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*) can give students a powerful window to certain aspects of its culture and society.

Students may arrive in your classroom with preconceptions about watching videos stemming from their experiences watching television, movies, and YouTube. Before showing a video, a reflective teacher will discuss with students the difference between watching as a casual viewer and watching as a scholar. You may also explain to students the learning purpose of the video.



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Digital video can be used as a catalyst for students' analysis or critical thinking. Students can closely study sequences from World War II newsreels and propaganda films such as *Olympiad* to identify how messages were shaped and disseminated in contemporary societies. You can base a study of U.S. presidential elections on a set of campaign commercials, such as those available from the Museum of the Moving Image ([www.livingroom-candidate.movingimage.us](http://www.livingroom-candidate.movingimage.us)). By guiding the class through a careful analysis of selected commercials, teachers can help students progress as scholars, citizens, and media consumers.

The most powerful way to immerse students in critical thinking using digital video is to engage them in student authorship—that is, creating video. As students compose a documentary using historical artifacts, they learn the content, develop their research and primary-source analysis skills, and

even come to understand the interpretive nature of historical accounts. An ambitious teacher can even have students recut a finished documentary to change the emphasis—sometimes just by rearranging the visuals.

Students may also document landmarks in their neighborhoods or communities and construct movies explaining the cultural significance of these sites. Or they can interview people in their communities about their memories of historical events and use these as source material for a classroom inquiry on history and remembrance.

The activities described here are only a small sample of the full range of possibilities for applying digital video to social studies instruction. As you design your own activities with digital video, keep in mind the options available to you, and observe the ways the technology interacts with the content and pedagogy to make your instruction more powerful.

By Thomas C. Hammond and John Lee

## Social Studies

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