

# Interpreting a Short Documentary Film

## Teacher Overview

The Library of Congress began collecting films, including many of those produced by Thomas Edison, in the 1890s. Many of these early motion pictures were not traditional narratives but rather actuality films that documented the American way of life at the beginning of the twentieth century. As such, they are valuable historical and cultural resources. Today, the Library of Congress houses thousands of films within its archives. This activity introduces students to this rich repository of early motion pictures. Students research, then screen one of the short documentary or actuality films from the Library of Congress collection. This activity challenges students' chronological thinking and historical comprehension skills, while at the same time integrating social studies/history with language arts.

## Learning Outcomes

Students will

- explain what a documentary film is and how it differs from an actuality film;
- research the online film collection of the Library of Congress to select, then screen and interpret, a short documentary or actuality film

## Explain & Explore

- Explain that the technology of the motion picture industry of the early twentieth century provided an opportunity to create new types of narratives, including documentary and actuality films as well as animated comic sketches. Often these films were shown in movie houses or as part of vaudeville acts. Vaudeville was a type of traveling show that played in theaters across the country, both in small towns and large cities. In an age when there was no television or computers, these types of films were both entertaining and informative.
- Write these three terms on the chalkboard or overhead projector and then explain each as recommended below: *documentary film* and *actuality film*.

Define *documentary film*. A documentary is a nonfiction film that records some aspect of the human condition. It may provide information about a real event, such as the San Francisco earthquake, or about real people, places, or situations. A popular contemporary documentary film is "Hoop Dreams," (1994). It records the struggle of two high school athletes to become basketball stars. "Nanook of the North" (see image above), made in 1922, was the first feature documentary film. The film recorded life among Eskimos.

- Define *actuality*. An actuality film does not tell a story, but rather records real people doing real things, such as sneezing, kissing, or walking down a street. Unlike the feature documentary film which often relies on research of factual information to present a story, an argument or a point of view, the actuality film is more like a slice of everyday life. The following frames are from an "actuality film" showing firefighters in New York City in 1903.



## Investigate

- Students will log onto the Internet to access the Library of Congress Website, specifically the home page of the Motion Picture and Television Reading Room: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/mopic>. From this page, they can easily access the American Memory collection of online films.
- Students should select one of the collection to investigate. They can download the video for viewing or simply study the selected frames from the film to determine which film they would like to be the subject of their study.

## Interpret

Documentary and actuality films may be nonfiction but they still require interpretation. Once students have selected their film for study, they should study the moving images to determine the audience and the purpose of the film. When was it created and why was it created? What information in the movie is fact and what information is fiction?

The questions below will guide students through their interpretation. Students should try to answer as many of these questions as possible.

1. **Identify the author of the document.** The information may be provided in the credits or on the Internet file page from which you downloaded the document. The author may be a person or a group. In some instances, the author may be “unknown.”  
Ask:
  - What is the author’s point of view?
  - What bias or prejudice might this author have?
2. **Identify the audience and the purpose for the document.** The audience may be the general viewing public, or it might be a more specific group, such as teenagers, parents, workers in a specific industry, or men and women enlisted in the military. The purpose may be to inform, to entertain, to express an opinion, or to persuade.  
Ask:
  - When and where was the document created?
  - Why was it created?
3. **Identify the information presented in the document.** Use your knowledge of the filmmaking process to interpret the film.  
Ask:
  - What do you see? Identify specific people, places, or objects the filmmaker shows.
  - Which details help you to better understand the subject or the period in which the film was made?
4. **Analyze the film language.** Use your knowledge of film language, including composition, camera angles and distances, lighting, editing, movement, and sound to evaluate the film’s message.  
Ask:
  - What message does the film have?
  - What does the filmmaker want the audience to believe or do?
5. **Make conclusions about the document.** Now that you have studied the document, make your conclusions based on specific details in the film.  
Ask:
  - What questions does the film answer and/or what questions does the film leave unanswered?
  - What value do these moving images have as a source of historical or cultural information?

## Inform

Students will write a descriptive report on their chosen documentary film. Their description should include more than just a summary of what they saw. Students should weave the answers to the questions above into their report.

Each of the early motion pictures in the Library of Congress collection provide a glimpse of American life as it was in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Students, therefore, may wish to comment on what has changed in American life today as illustrated in the film they choose for study.