

WRITING ABOUT HISTORY USING MOVING IMAGES

Teacher Note: This lesson is taken from the teaching unit for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Chapter 4, Lesson 4: “Writing About History Using Moving Images.” In order for students to complete this activity, they must have access to the Internet, with the capability to download archived films.

Overview

Ask your students why they go to the movies, and the immediate response will likely be, “It’s fun” or “It’s something to do.” Few, if any, will say they go to movies to better understand the world in which they live or to better understand themselves! And yet movies, both documentaries and fictional dramas, are windows through which we can learn about other people and cultures. This lesson introduces students to archival collections of documentary videos from the early 1900s through the 20th century. Students select a video for study. They analyze the historic value of the video using document-based questions (DBQs), then write a short paper on their interpretations. The goal of this lesson is twofold: (1) to introduce students to the concept that history is argument, or interpretation, based on evidence; and (2) to show that moving images can be an effective tool for presenting evidence.

Learning Outcomes

Students will

- understand that history is an interpretation of facts;
- research archival films for a written or oral presentation on a historical event or social issue.

Concept

Moving-image texts from 1896 onward are available as contemporary records of events, places, and people. Although authentic historical or cultural documents, these moving-image texts still require interpretation.

Engage

Share this information with students:

In 1963, an assassin shot and killed President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas. The assassination happened during midday, when most people were at work or at school. They did not see the video footage of the president’s motorcade moving through the streets in the moments just prior to the assassination. That evening, however, and for days after, the footage played repeatedly on television news.

Ask students this question: *The assassination happened in the past, but was it history?* Guide discussion along these lines:

1. History requires evidence. Most students will understand that evidence exists to prove the event happened.
2. History has consequences. Students may not understand the actual consequences of this event, but most will appreciate that the murder of a president would surely affect the country.
3. History is an attempt to understand the past. Most students may not be aware that investigations into the assassination took many years and that the video footage of the event became important evidence in that investigation. That said, not everyone interpreted the video images in the same way.

Ask students to list similar historical events that they saw happen on television news. These may include the election of a president, the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City, an Olympic champion winning a gold medal, a disaster such as an earthquake or a fire, etc. List student responses on the chalkboard or overhead projector. Stress this important point: An image may document what happened, but an image alone does not explain why something happened or what the consequences might be or have been. That is the work of the historian.

Explain & Explore

- Introduce the writing activity. Students will play the role of a historian interpreting a moving-image document. They will work with a partner or a team to select the moving-image document they wish to view and interpret. The document may be from any period of history. Then they will write their interpretation of the document in one of three formats—a description, a narration, or an argument.

- Distribute and display **Graphic Organizer 4-4: Writing About History** (found at the end of this lesson) to introduce students to the writing process involved in this assignment. Review the key concepts on the graphic organizer as suggested below.

Step 1: The Prewriting Process

By middle school, most students should know that writing involves a process, and prewriting is the first step in the process. Here the writer brainstorms ideas, researches a topic, then focuses the topic to include a theme or a thesis. The same writing process holds true when writing about history or historical documents.

Primary Source Documents

A primary source document is one created by people who actually saw or participated in an event and recorded that event or their reactions to it immediately after the event. By contrast, a secondary source is one created by someone either not present when the event took place or removed by time from the event. A primary source document could be a letter, a diary, a photograph, a moving image, etc.

Step 2: The Writing Process

In general, historical interpretations can be presented in one of three ways:

Description

A description is a portrayal of a person, a place, or an object at a particular moment in time. Specific details are very important in descriptive writing, but description is more than a random collection of sentences about what a person or place or object looks or sounds like. The passage has a dominant impression or overall tone, such as authoritative, ominous, mysterious, etc. One strategy for writing description is showing change over a period of time.

Narrative

A narrative tells a story about a person, a place, or an object. Narrative writing includes the following elements—characters, setting, conflict, action, and resolution. Details are also important, but they are arranged chronologically, from the story’s beginning through the story’s end. Like descriptive writing, narrative writing must also have a point or overall message.

Argument

An argument is an essay that expresses an opinion or point of view about a subject, then supports that statement with evidence. The goal is to persuade. An argument has two elements—a *claim*, or statement, about a controversial issue; and *logic*, reasons or evidence to support the claim. In choosing to write an argument, however, keep in mind that you cannot argue facts or things that are impossible to change.

- Distribute **History Writing Activity 4-11: Document-Based Questions (DBQs)**. Review all three parts with students to ensure they understand how to proceed. Explain that their interpretations may be written or oral presentations. Allow time for students to view and complete their interpretations.
- Assign part 3, writing the paper. Share students’ final presentations with the class.

Close

Ask students to state in their own words how a film can help them better understand a historical period. Guide discussion to include key concepts presented in the chapter: A film is a cultural document; filmmakers re-present history, often using primary source documents; a documentary is a nonfiction film that presents real people and real events, but even documentaries can reflect a filmmaker’s bias or point of view; primary source documents, including film, require thoughtful interpretation.

STUDENT WRITING ACTIVITY

Document-Based Questions (DBQs)

Part 1—Find a Moving-Image Document to Interpret

Directions: You may wish to review moving-image texts at the sites listed below.. Once you have found a document, record the source information by completing the chart below.

- **America’s Story from America’s Library**, presented by the Library of Congress. Go to www.americaslibrary.gov and click on one of the circle icons to search a timeline of events or a listing of people or other topics that interest you. When choosing a topic, look for an entry with a TV screen icon indicating a video is available for viewing.
Examples: You can view a film in which President Teddy Roosevelt rides with the Rough Riders. Or you can view one of the first-ever animated cartoons, “Gertie on Tour,” dated 1921.
- **Prelinger Archives.** In 2002, the Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division acquired this collection of more than 48,000 films. Go to www.archive.org/details/prelinger and type your keywords in the search box.
Examples: You can view a 1960 documentary on the civil rights movement focusing on sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and rallies in Alabama, New York, and Washington D.C. Or you can view a 1936 silent movie documenting the flood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Or you can download a kinescope image of the first-ever presidential debate broadcast on television in 1960, between candidates John Kennedy and Richard Nixon.

Identifying Information

Title of film: Date: Running time:	
Author (person or group that sponsored or produced the film):	
Logline (a brief summary of the content):	
Reasons why I chose this particular document:	

(Sample Lesson 2, continued)

Part 2—Interpret the Moving-Image Document

Directions: Once you have selected a document for study, complete the step-by-step analysis below. Write your responses on a separate sheet of paper. Depending on the document you select, you may not be able to answer all the questions just by viewing the film. You may have to do additional research, cross-checking the information in the film with other print sources.

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 do I know about this author?

What bias or prejudice might this author have?

What is the author’s point of view?

Did the author have first-hand knowledge of the person or event? Was the author a witness?

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?

Was this film intended to be seen by the public? Or was it a private record?

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.

What is the film’s narrative structure, that is, how does the film begin, rise to a turning point, and end?

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?

What techniques does the filmmaker use to create this message?

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?

What questions does the film leave unanswered?

Why do I think this document is history and not just a series of images from the past?

What value do these moving images have as a source of historical or cultural information?

(Sample Lesson 2, continued)

Part 3—Write About the Document

Directions: Once you have completed your interpretation, write your ideas in a short paper. Follow the steps below.

1. Decide which method of discussing the moving-image document you wish to take. Select A, B, or C below. Read carefully the definition of each before deciding.

A. Description

A description is a portrayal of a person, a place, or an object at a particular moment in time. Specific details are very important in descriptive writing, but description is more than a random collection of sentences about what a person, place, or object looks like. The passage has a dominant impression, or overall tone, such as authoritative, ominous, mysterious, etc. One strategy for writing description is showing change over a period of time.

B. Narrative

A narrative tells a story about a person, a place, or an object. Narrative writing includes the following elements—characters, setting, conflict, action, and resolution. Details are also important, but they are arranged chronologically, from the story’s beginning through the story’s end. Like descriptive writing, narrative writing must also have a point or overall message.

C. Argument

An argument is an essay that expresses an opinion or point of view about a subject, then supports that statement with evidence. The goal is to persuade. An argument has two elements—a *claim*, or statement, about a controversial issue; and *logic*, reasons or evidence to support the claim. In choosing to write an argument, however, keep in mind that you cannot argue facts or things that are impossible to change.

2. Develop your ideas, using the format you selected. Ensure that your written information has the necessary elements as described above.

3. Present your description, narrative, or argument to the class.

