

Film Studies Syllabus by Paige Mayhew

I like to organize each lesson around film clips – short scenes that illustrate whatever element we’re studying. For the teacher, I think it would help to have two or three specific sequences identified by starting and ending times as timed from the beginning of the film. Something like *Dead Poet’s Society* (Peter Weir, 1989, PG, 128 min.)(0:53:28 to 0:58:00). I don’t actually have all that detail on all the films I use, but I can be get it in time. With the advent of DVDs for most of these films, I can also indicate a scene number and title.

We probably need an introduction to the teacher in which I identify minimal and ideal technology for the classroom. So much of what I’ve found can be enhanced with internet resources that even one computer with connections in the classroom can be valuable. There are ways to view websites offline as well so that a teacher can take a website back to the classroom and show it offline. Then I could list appropriate websites in the teacher materials for each lesson and/or you could maintain an up-to-date web connection on the Center for Learning website.

It probably wouldn’t hurt to include some legal guidelines on the use of movies in the classroom as a convenience for any teachers who find themselves challenged.

I think of Film Studies as a writing course and I like to emphasize the truth that students don’t earn grades for watching films, but rather for writing about what they watch.

The following are suggested lessons, which need not necessarily be covered in this order.

Lesson One: Why Study Film?

I like to start with what students know and like by having them generate a list of their Top Ten Films, pick three from that list to write a paragraph explaining why they like the film, and then share one film from the list in a discussion with the class. This lets me find out just how informed they really are and introduce the concept of genre as we compile a class list.

Next step is for them to survey a parent or grandparent and get their Top Ten Films to share. This helps make a connection to many of the more classical or historical films we study later, but also helps cover genres that students may not know (i.e. film noir).

This could be a good place to introduce American Film Institute and Academy lists, etc. as a resource for later.

Clips from the beginning of *Sullivan’s Travels* and the end of *Sunset Boulevard*.

Lesson Two: Three Ways of Viewing Film

This approach is based on the master work in this field, *Reel Conversations: Reading Films with Young Adults* by Alan Teasley and Ann Wilder. They focus on the literary, dramatic, and cinematic aspects of a film. I find it useful to break that down further into three separate activities over the same film sequence.

1. Literary aspects – narrative, dramatic, and poetic elements of film
2. Dramatic aspects – acting, sets, makeup, and costume in film
3. Cinematic aspects – cinematography and editing

Lesson Three: The Language of Film

Special terminology for shots and cuts, with film clips for analysis. Probably should include a test of some sort since this knowledge is important for later lessons. This is a good place to introduce the importance of specialized terms for informed discussion – how to talk the talk. For an activity, I also like to have them look at a scene from a screenplay and write a scene of their own so they’ll understand the format.

Lesson Four: How to Watch a Silent Film

The development of film as photography, with a study of some early short film clips. Clips from *Voyage to the Moon*, *The Great Train Robbery*, and *Birth of a Nation*.

In-depth study of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush*.

Lesson Five: How to Watch a Black & White Film

Discussion of lighting and further study of shots and cuts. Major assignment is an essay on outside viewing of a black and white film from an approved list.

In-depth study of *Casablanca*.

Lesson Six: Brief History of Film

Group research and presentations project covering the decades – major films, stars and directors, technological developments, cultural context, and genre of the period. This unit usually needs some special attention to research techniques, parenthetical documentation, and bibliography format.

Viewing Guide for either of the two main overview videos available – *Disney's* or *AFI's 100 Years of Film*.

Lesson Seven: The Romantic Comedy (Sub-genre Screwball Comedy)

Discussion of stereotypes as associated with gender. Clips from *My Man Godfrey*, *Adam's Rib*, *The African Queen*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Annie Hall*, *When Harry Met Sally*.

In-depth study of *It Happened One Night*.

Lesson Eight: Film Noir

Discussion of technology and its impact on film. This is a good place to talk about tone and mood and apply those literary concepts to film. Clips from *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Bladerunner*, and *L.A. Story*.

In-depth study of *Double Indemnity*.

Lesson Nine: The War Film

Discussion of propaganda films and the evolution of the war, or rather anti-war, film. This genre is a bit difficult to teach since most films are either jingoist or violently anti-war. Clips should cover the full range from *Guadalcanal Diary*, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Patton*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *84 Charlie Mopic*, *Platoon*, to *Saving Private Ryan*.

In-depth study of *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Gallipoli*.

Lesson Ten: The Western Film

Discussion of the American Dream, romantic concept of the West, and adaptation of a genre (parody, transformation, re-interpretation). Clips from *Red River*, *The Searchers*, *Lonely Are the Brave*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, *Silverado*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Road Warrior*, and *The Unforgiven*.

In-depth study of *High Noon*.

Lesson Eleven: Detectives and Gangsters

In-depth study of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Lesson Twelve: The Teen Flick or Coming of Age

In-depth study of *Rebel without a Cause*.

Lesson Thirteen: Science Fiction and Horror Films

In-depth study of *Nosferatu*.

Lesson Fourteen: Music and Musicals

In-depth study of *Singin' in the Rain*.

Lesson Fifteen: Animation

Pinocchio, *The Lady and the Tramp*

Lesson Sixteen: Film Reviews, Research and Theory

Reviewing the Reviewers.

Lesson Seventeen: The Job of Film-Making

Instructional, Commercial etc.

Lesson Eighteen: The Great Directors

Lesson Nineteen: How to Watch a Foreign Film

Lesson Twenty: Adaptations

May want to find a place for Historical Films and Epics.

Literary Information on Dreams & Quests may be added to Lesson Sixteen.

Writing formats -- The Movie Treatment, Storyboard

Add *The Writer's Journey* to bibliography.