

Choosing Appropriate Films to Screen in Class

When screening films in the classroom, there are a lot of different factors to take into account. The age of the students, the dynamic between them and the instructor, and the materials being taught all play into the process of choosing an effective film.

Age Appropriate

Make sure to consider the age of the students when choosing what to show. Younger children have a hard time focusing during lengthy films. Commercials, shorts, or specific scenes are all good alternates to showing a full-length film. If watching something longer than 10 minutes, it helps retention to stop at an appropriate point, quickly debrief, and then continue. Even if a piece is not more than 10 minutes, stopping to specify techniques along the way can teach kids how to deconstruct media. If you choose to show any controversial material, make sure you have approval from the teaching staff and also prepare the kids in advance with context and a warning.

Length

In addition to it being helpful to stick to shorter films for younger audiences, it also allows for ample time for discussion afterwards. Around three 2-3 minute pieces or two 5-7 minute pieces translate to roughly 40 minutes of class time. Since time is of the essence, avoid watching material that has any extraneous information. Don't feel pressured to show an entire video if not all of it is relevant to what you are trying to teach — students can get distracted and lose track of the main concept if there is too much to focus on.

Establish Purpose

Before you screen, let the students know what they should be looking for in the material. That way, they'll have something to do while watching and will remain involved. Make sure the films you choose have a clear purpose, so students know how what they are watching is applicable to the bigger picture. After watching, ask students why they think you chose to show them the material to check that they understand what is going on in the film.

Give Context

If the lesson you are trying to teach has some context, be it historical, scientific, or conceptual, give background before you screen. Find classic film clips that have a story behind them — something interesting about the actors, the time period it was made during, or the process of production — to get students thinking about what goes on behind the scenes. This could be a good springboard into a lesson about film history or learning about the different roles on a movie set.

Demystifying the movie process is one of the most fascinating aspects of film studies — pointing out interesting details (or “clues”) can help turn the process of media deconstruction into a mystery to be solved. Don't be afraid to choose pieces in which production mistakes were made. Taking a moment to critique what went wrong, in addition to discussing what was done well, can teach students about the difficulties of production and also what makes a good film great. It can be helpful to choose two pieces and compare their strengths and weaknesses.

Genre

If you're teaching a lesson that has to do with genre, choose genre-appropriate material. If it doesn't really matter the genre, keep in mind that younger kids are often engaged by upbeat, fast-paced, comedic material. If you're dealing with a rowdy classroom, a comedic piece can serve as a way to engage everyone. Be wary of literacy levels when making your choice. Avoid foreign films that require students to read subtitles, at least until later in high school. Story-building concepts and much of the pre-production process overlap in both animation and film so it also works to show animated pieces. Pieces that don't contain a lot of dialogue can serve as both a way to demonstrate to students how story can be told without words and involve those who may have learning disabilities.