

Blurring the Lines Between Fact and Fiction

Overview

In this lesson, students read a short text about the ways in which filmmakers and producers take liberties with historical narratives for the sake of entertainment. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation based on the reading. In this structured discussion method, under the guidance of a facilitator (the teacher), participants are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

Standards and Topics

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10/11-12.1.A:** Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C:** Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D:** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C:** Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D:** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Topics: history, historical accuracy, ancient Sparta, John F. Kennedy

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Explain the extent to which movie producers, directors, and writers have a responsibility to portray historical events and people accurately.
2. Evaluate examples of movies that altered historical facts.
3. Participate in civil conversation, which will enable them to:
 - a. Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
 - b. Use close reading skills to analyze a text.
 - c. Present text-based claims.
 - d. Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.
 - e. Identify common ground among differing views.

Materials

- **Handout A – Blurring the Lines Between Fact and Fiction** (one per student)
- **Handout B – Civil Conversation Guide** (one per student)

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

- A. Tell students to think of a time when they either heard a rumor or when a rumor was told about them. What is the danger of a rumor spreading, either online or in real time? (*Answers may include the fact that the facts get distorted, someone's reputation may be harmed, etc.*)
- B. Tell students that today they will be discussing what happens when filmmakers change the facts of history for the purposes of entertainment.

II. Reading: Blurring the Lines Between Fact and Fiction

- A. Briefly overview the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the Overview above to help you. Give each student a copy of **Handout A: Blurring the Lines Between Fact and Fiction**.
- B. Distribute a copy of the **Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide** to each student. To complete as they read. (Each student should fill in his/her own guide.)

III. Activity: Civil Conversation

- A. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.
- B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (You will know what's best for your students, depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)
 - **Time:** Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with. Consider the length/difficult of the text(s) students will use and how experienced in student-directed discussion your students are in determining the time.

- **Small Groups:** This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group students who will use the same text.
- C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the Guide to get started.
 - D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.
 - E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:
 - What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
 - What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
 - Ask all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.
- B. If you want to debrief the content of the Civil Conversation, you might ask:
 - Was there any surprising information you learned from the reading and Civil Conversation? What was it?
 - What are the problems, if any, with filmmakers altering historical facts in their creative projects for movies and T.V.?
 - How would the examples of filmmakers altering historical facts compare to the example(s) of rumors they thought about at the beginning of class? How might the harms be different?
 - What, if anything, should the government do about it? What, if anything, should you as consumers do about it?
- C. For assessment, look for the following on each student's Civil Conversation Guide:
 - Step 2 – A, B: Basic understanding of text.
 - Step 2 – C, D: Text-based arguments.
 - Step 2 – E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
 - Step 4 – A: Level of participation (should be “about the same as others”).
 - Step 4 – B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
 - Step 4 – C, D: Specificity/text-based.
- D. For additional assessment, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

Blurring the Lines Between Fact and Fiction

Movies are a powerful force in American culture. They offer us adventure, drama, and a window on the rest of the world. In recent years, on television and cable and in theaters, there has been an explosion of movies based on real events, both modern and historical. Sometimes called docudramas, they combine elements of the documentary form, which is supposed to be non-fictional, and drama, which is fictional. In some cases, this form of movie has come under attack by historians or other experts who claim that docudramas can distort history and mislead the public about important events.



In 1992, producer and director Oliver Stone released his movie *JFK*, a docudrama on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Based on the investigations of Jim Garrison, the one-time district attorney of New Orleans, the movie mixed actual news footage with purely fictional scenes. It offered the controversial conclusion that the president had been murdered as the result of a conspiracy involving high-placed officials in the federal government.

Historians of the era and actual participants in the events criticized Stone for freely making up characters and situations to support his conspiracy theory and for misleading the public about what actually happened. Stone defended his production stating that there was a basis for his speculations and that the movie-going public could distinguish fact from fiction. He also argued that even Shakespeare in his historical plays freely rearranged facts to support the drama.

The 2007 movie *300* tells the story of the Battle of Thermopylae, which took place in ancient Greece in 480 B.C. The movie is based on Frank Miller's 1998 graphic novel of the same name and tells how King Leonidas of Sparta refuses to submit to the vast Persian Empire. Enraged, the Persian emperor, Xerxes, leads a huge army to invade Greece. Against the wishes of other leaders, Leonidas leads a force of 300 warriors to block the Persians at the narrow pass of Thermopylae. For three days, they hold off the invaders, but finally they are defeated. Before he dies, Leonidas sends soldiers back to Sparta to tell what happened and to rally all of Greece against the invaders.

Any movie based on the ancient past faces two basic challenges. One is to tell a story the audience can relate to. *300* succeeded at this. The second challenge is to capture an era far different from our own and get the history right. Indeed, the movie includes famous quotations from the Greek historian Herodotus's account of the battle. But the movie's cartoonish portrayal of Xerxes the Great contradicts Herodotus, who wrote: "Among all this multitude of men, there was not one who, for beauty and stature, deserved more than Xerxes himself to wield so vast a power."

The movie also portrays slaves as a prominent part only of Persian society. Yet almost all ancient societies relied on slaves, none more than the Spartans' society. The movie similarly dismisses Greeks other than Spartans. It misrepresents the role that other Greeks, particularly the Athenians, had in beginning the war and ultimately defeating the Persians.

Questions remain: Should laws be passed that protect the dead from having lies told about them in books or movies? If not, what moral or ethical obligations should movie producers or writers have for telling the truth about history, even in "fictional" works?

CIVIL CONVERSATION GUIDE

Name: _____

Class: _____

Title of Reading: _____

Step 1: Read.

- A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.
- B. Re-read the selection and annotate (“talk to”) the text:
- Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
 - Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
 - Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a “?”.
 - Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...	B. The MAIN POINTS are:
C. In the reading, I agree with:	D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

Step 3: Discuss and listen.

RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
3. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

You will have _____ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

At the end of the reading, you will likely find at least one discussion question. Use that question to get started. If time permits, you can also discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

If the reading does not provide discussion questions, choose questions to discuss from Section E.

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? ___ Less than, ___ About the same as, ___ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the Civil Conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)