



DOCLANDS

EDUCATION

APRIL 28 - MAY 2



CURRICULUM GUIDE
GRADES: 8-12

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Dear Educators,

Thank you for attending the 9th Annual DocLands Documentary Film Festival screening of the documentary feature film *Middletown*. We are excited to return in our 2025 spring season with a combination of both in-theater screenings for local schools and online screenings for those of you joining us from afar.

As media educators, we support film as the literature of the twenty-first century. This powerful medium sits in a critical part of human culture, at the intersection of art, industry, technology, and politics. It is a universal language that lets us tell stories about our collective hopes and fears and gives us the opportunity to make sense of the world around us and the people in it. This year, our film selections for school screenings continue to focus on increasingly relevant issues of global empathy and active citizenship, and we believe this film will be a powerful and engaging text to use in your classroom. These curricular materials are designed to get students to engage deeply with the film by the common-core aligned skills of developing an evidence-based interpretation of a text both orally and in writing.

The discussion prompts have been crafted to offer students the opportunity to grapple with questions of ethics and social justice through representations of culture in film. They offer a variety of options for fostering small-group or whole-class dialogue by addressing the film industry in general and this film in particular. If your students are already familiar with a process of writing evidence-based interpretive essays, consider using the suggested essay prompts for a short writing piece, or consider the film review format as an alternative. Additionally, student handouts for a variety of thinking routines are provided for before, during, and after viewing the film with a particular emphasis on social-emotional learning. Extension activities offer further creative opportunities for students to consider the cultural impact of the film as both an art form and a political platform. We have also included a handout that provides some context for the film festival experience, which may help to introduce your screening experience.

Thank you so much for your tireless work! Enjoy the film!

Sincerely,
The CAFILM Education Team

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What makes a documentary truthful? Can documentaries ever be completely objective?
2. How does a filmmaker's perspective influence the way a story is told?
3. What techniques do documentaries use to make their stories compelling?
4. Do teenagers have the power to drive meaningful change by using their voices, creativity, and activism? Do you believe they have the potential to challenge injustices, influence public opinion, and inspire action?
5. What was the documentary *Middletown* about? What issues does it address and why are they important?
6. How do traditional journalism techniques, such as investigative research, interviewing, and fact-checking, shape the storytelling approach in documentary filmmaking? How did these techniques contribute to the student-led documentary's credibility, narrative structure, and ethical considerations?
7. How did the student-led documentary within the documentary challenge traditional storytelling methods? Did it experiment with form, structure, or perspective, considering the time it was made?
8. Did the documentary raise questions about the ethics of storytelling? Were there any moments in the documentary where you questioned the filmmakers' choices? In any way did *Middletown* construct its version of events, rather than just present them?
9. How does this film change the way you think about documentaries as a medium for truth and storytelling?
10. How did this documentary challenge or inspire you? What actions can you take based on what you learned?
11. How would you approach making a documentary about an issue that matters to you? How would you balance objectivity with storytelling?

DISCUSSION NOTECATCHER

Directions:

Use this notecatcher to record what you take away from discussing the questions above.

IDEAS I HEARD DURING DISCUSSION

MIND-POP IDEAS

Ideas that came to my mind during discussion.

ONE IMPORTANT THING I LEARNED DURING DISCUSSION

INTERPRETIVE ESSAY PROMPTS

1. **Student-led Documentary Filmmaking and Social Change:** How does *Middletown* highlight how a group of student filmmakers documented environmental injustice and corporate negligence in water contamination in their community? Support your argument with examples that show the challenges the students faced in establishing credibility, accessing information, and gaining public attention. Address how they overcome these obstacles to effect real change.
2. **Meta-aspects, A Film within a Film:** How does the documentary's self-awareness, or its acknowledgment of the filmmaking process, shape the audience's understanding of truth and activism? Support your argument with examples that show how *Middletown* not only exposes water pollution and a community's fight for justice, but is also a film about making a film and the act of storytelling.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Film Stage: Middletown Remembers a High School Class that Held up Truth to Power
<https://thefilmstage.com/sundance-review-middletown-remembers-a-high-school-class-that-held-up-truth-to-power/>

Middletown Uncovers the Story of Investigative Student Journalists
https://www.voxmagazine.com/arts/movies/true-false-film-review-middletown-2025/article_784be2d4-f61a-11ef-9e9f-63f7774a2eff.html

Garbage, Gangsters, and Greed
<http://www.garbagegangstersandgreed.com/>

CAFILM Documentary Film Production for Teens
<https://www.cafilmedu.org/summerfilm/>

ABOUT CAFILM

The nonprofit California Film Institute celebrates and promotes film as art and education through year-round programming at the independent Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, presentation of the acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival and DocLands Documentary Film Festival, as well as cultivation of the next generation of filmmakers and audiences through CAFILM Education programs.

Follow the California Film Institute on social media



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STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards ELA-Literacy

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.3

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Name: _____



ABOUT THE FILM

Inspired by an unconventional teacher, a group of teenagers in upstate New York in the early 1990s make a student film and uncover a vast conspiracy that is poisoning their community. Thirty years later, they revisit their film and confront the legacy of this transformative experience. A powerful and engaging coming-of-age documentary, *Middletown* highlights teenage tenacity and civic courage. It uses archival footage and interviews to recount a decade-long investigation into toxic waste dumping and a local government cover-up.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

JESSE MOSS & AMANDA MCBAIN

Filmmakers Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss know their way into the good graces of the young. Through such documentaries as the Emmy-winning *Boys State* and *Girls State*, they've also carved a niche for themselves in honoring their youthful subjects' idealism and energy. With *Middletown*, they add a twist to that gift. In bringing together Isseks and four of the most dogged of *Middletown* High School's reporters, now adults, the directors tell a story of teenage tenacity but also one of adults grappling with the grit and hopes of their younger selves.



JOURNAL ENTRY

THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF EDUCATION

Directions:

The act of writing helps us think about a topic. The film you are about to watch is about a group of high school students inspired to find the stories that need telling. Their commitment to investigative journalism was because of an unconventional and devoted teacher who started a class in the early 1990s called Electronic English and turned his classroom into a production studio.

1. What brings you to school?

2. How can unconventional classes, such as courses on social justice, filmmaking, mindfulness, or outdoor education, transform the public school experience? How do these types of courses engage students differently, help them to develop critical skills, and impact personal growth compared to traditional subjects?

3. Have you had a teacher who did something that changed, or is changing, the course of your whole life because of their classroom curriculum or instructional style? Who has been the most influential teacher in your life and how have they impacted your education?

BEFORE VIEWING

ANTICIPATION GUIDE

Directions:

The film you are about to watch reminds audiences why they love documentaries because, at its heart, it encourages you at any age to hold onto that desire to delve more deeply into understanding what's going on around you. For each statement, decide whether you Agree or Disagree, then write a one or two sentence explanation for your opinion.

STATEMENT	AGREE/DISAGREE	EXPLANATION
Age is no barrier to making a difference in the world.		
Teenagers have the power to drive meaningful change.		
Civic courage means acting as if you live in a real democracy.		
Film is our literature for the next one thousand years.		
You don't learn by sitting in the classroom and taking notes. You learn by getting involved.		
Documentaries serve as a powerful tool for truth and change, inspiring audiences to question, reflect, and take action.		

DURING VIEWING

ELEMENTS OF DOCUMENTARY NOTECATCHER

Directions:

The elements of documentary are the different types of sound and image used to explore the subject of the film. There are six basic elements that can be found in all documentaries, though a film might not use all of them. While viewing, use the chart below to record impactful moments and scenes from the film in the appropriate box based on what element of documentary filmmaking is used. Then, after viewing, briefly analyze which of the elements were used most effectively in this film.

Narration Narration is the spoken word heard throughout a film. Sometimes the narrator is a person in the film, and sometimes it is a disconnected observer.	Actuality Footage Actuality footage refers to the unscripted footage recorded in the making of the documentary.	Archival Materials Archival materials are the pieces of film, video, photographs, documents, and sound recordings that were created for other uses prior to the documentary.
On-Screen Text Text is often used throughout a documentary to provide important facts, identify people, and present additional information.	Interviews Interviews are the recorded conversations with a person who has some connection to or knowledge about the subject of the film.	Animations/Reenactments Documentaries will sometimes use animation or staged recreations of situations and events in order to tell a story.

Which of the elements of documentary filmmaking were used most effectively in this film?

Explain Your Reasoning.

WHILE VIEWING

NOTICE & NOTE: THE META ASPECTS OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

How to Use this Thinking Routine:

This thinking routine encourages students to engage critically with the meta aspects of documentary filmmaking in *Middletown*. Using this routine will foster deeper media literacy and an understanding of the constructed nature of nonfiction storytelling. While viewing, note in the right-hand column what you notice about the following documentary filmmaking signposts listed in the left-hand column.

NOTICE	NOTE
Note moments where the documentary calls attention to its own storytelling process.	
Identify scenes where the filmmakers interact with subjects or shape the narrative.	
Observe the use of editing, framing, music, and voiceover. How do these elements influence your perception of the story?	
Consider what was included and what may have been omitted and how that affects the message.	

REFLECTION	
How does the documentary ('Gangsters, Garbage, & Greed') within the documentary (<i>Middletown</i>) impact the way the audience engages with the film's message?	
Does this layering enhance storytelling and authenticity, or does it create distance between the viewer and its subject?	

AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Directions:

Respond to each question, referring to specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your interpretation.

1. What is Electronic English? What was the objective of the class and why were students engaged with what it had to offer as an alternative to a conventional English classroom?

2. Who was the teacher behind Electronic English? What was his reasoning for inventing the class? What challenges and criticisms was he forced to confront and overcome within the academic community?

3. What was the subject of "Garbage, Gangsters, and Greed"? What story did the high school students uncover in *Middletown*?

4. What journalism techniques did the students use to approach their documentary? How did these techniques contribute to the documentary's credibility, narrative structure, and ethical considerations?

AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

5. What impact did the student-led documentary ("Gangsters, Garbage, and Greed") have on the community when it was originally released? What are the implications of revisiting the issue now, through the lens of *Middletown*?

6. Revisit your responses on the Anticipation Guide. Has your opinion on any statement changed? Explain what details from the film either changed or affirmed your prior knowledge and beliefs.



AFTER VIEWING

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

How to Use this Thinking Routine:

Middletown is the story of a group of teenagers in upstate New York in the early 1990s who make a student film and uncover a vast conspiracy that is poisoning their community. Thirty years later, they revisit their film and confront the legacy of this transformative experience. This extension activity is to dig a little deeper by doing some investigative journalism after watching the film. In journalism, it is important to separate fact from feeling. In documentary filmmaking, it is important to establish credibility and maintain truth and ethics in storytelling.

1. **Dilemma.** What is the central issue of the film?
2. **Facts and events.** What are the facts and events of the situation? What evidence from the film confirms these?
3. **Thoughts and feelings.** Identify the thoughts and feelings of the characters/participants in the situation. What evidence confirms these?
4. **Clear.** Record what is clear from the film in the column below.
5. **Need to check.** Record what may still be unclear or lacks sufficient evidence from the film in the column below.
6. **Research.** Before you make your best judgment about this story, do some additional research and try to clarify what is unclear or lacks sufficient evidence.
7. **Judgment.** Make your best judgment about the situation, based on this information.



REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

	WHAT I LEARNED/WHAT IS CLEAR	WHAT I NEED TO CHECK/ RESEARCH FURTHER
FACTS & EVENTS What happened? What evidence from the film confirms this?		
THOUGHTS & FEELINGS How did the characters think or feel about it?		
My Best Judgment on the Issue:		

A Thinking Routine Borrowed from Harvard Project Zero’s Think Routine Toolbox:
<https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

SO CHANGE IT! SOCIAL JUSTICE & YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Directions:

Develop and deliver a two-minute speech about an issue you feel passionately about. It's an opportunity for you to explore the issues impacting your own community, and make your voice heard about the change you would like to see.

Prompt: What is the most important issue facing your community?

Part One: Answer the following questions to explore an issue you are passionate about.

What are you most proud of in your community? This could be your school, city, society, or country?

What would you change in your community, if you could? List as many things as you can think of.

Now, choose the one you feel the most strongly about. Write it here and explain why you are so passionate about it.

Who is impacted by this issue?

Why should people care about addressing this issue?

What would it look like if this issue were addressed?

Part Two: Write your speech using persuasive appeals.

Suggested Structure

Introduction

- Hook/Lead-In Statement-Introduction of Topic
- Three Main Points
- Thesis Statement/Claim

Body

- First Point + Evidence + Discussion/Commentary
- Second Point + Evidence + Discussion/Commentary
- Third Point + Evidence + Discussion/Commentary

Conclusion

- General Summary and Restatement of Thesis/Claim
- Restatement of Main Points/Argument
- Wrap-Up/Extension or Yes, And!

Part Three: Present your speech to the class.

Part Four: Consider continuing your social justice and youth empowerment work by turning your speech into a podcast or a longer article and submitting it to a news organization in your community.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

STUDENT-LED DOCUMENTARY PROJECT: SOCIAL JUSTICE & YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Directions:

Create a short documentary film that explores a social justice issue to highlight youth empowerment. This project allows students to engage with filmmaking as a tool for change. It encourages research, storytelling, and filmmaking techniques to inspire awareness and action while developing critical thinking and media literacy skills.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Students will work individually or in small groups to produce a 5-10 minute documentary on a social justice issue of their choice. The documentary should feature real-world stories, research, and perspectives that highlight the role of youth addressing the issue.

Select a Social Justice Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Choose an issue that resonates with you and impacts young people (e.g. climate change, racial justice, gender equality, mental health, LGBTQ+ rights, education inequity, prison reform, immigration, pollution).Research the topic to understand its history, key figures, and current challenges.
Develop a Story Concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Determine the focus of your documentary. Will it highlight a personal story, a community initiative, or a broader movement?Identify potential interview subjects (activists, peers, educators, experts, etc.).Outline the key message and purpose of your film
Plan Your Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Create a storyboard and shot list.Write interview questions and plan locations for filming.Assign roles (director, editor, interviewer, etc.).
Film Your Documentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Conduct interviews and capture relevant footage (e.g. protests, community work, historical references).Use a mix of interviews, voiceovers, and supporting footage to tell your story.Pay attention to visuals, sound quality, and framing as storytelling techniques.
Edit & Refine	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use video editing software to compile and refine footage.Add music, narration, and text as needed.Ensure a clear structure: introduction, issue exploration, youth impact, and conclusion.
Present & Reflect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Share the documentary with the class or a wider audience.Reflect on the process: What did you learn? How did this project impact your perspective on social justice?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

FILM REVIEW

Directions:

After watching the documentary feature *Middletown*, write a review of the film.

While a film review is an evaluation of a movie, it is not simply a viewer-response expressing the writer's feelings about the film. Instead, a film review attempts to do three things for the reader:

1. **Summarize** what the film is about (the story)
2. **Interpret** the film/filmmakers' intended meaning (the themes and claims)
3. **Evaluate** whether the film is successful in expressing the intended meaning (its effectiveness in conveying the themes and claims)

A review will support its perspective with evidence from the film, such as descriptions of important moments, characters, and scenes.

Suggested Structure

Introduction

- Introduce the film: title, director, and any relevant credentials (award wins for the film, other films by the director, origins for the film's story, etc.).
- Summarize what the film is about - briefly, and without any "spoilers" that give away plot twists and surprises.

Body

- Offer an interpretation of what the film/director is trying to say through this story. In other words, what is the film's theme, message, or primary claim?

Conclusion

- Evaluate whether the film is successful or not in conveying its intended message.
- Identify who the intended audience is and how effective the film is in meeting their needs. Is the film for a particular age group or social group?

Final Tip: Make sure to include some critical appraisal of the film in the first and last sentence, but try to weave it throughout the review as well.



EXTENSION ACTIVITY

FILM REVIEW

My Film Review

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS



An opening night screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

What is a film festival?

A film festival is an event in which multiple movies are presented over the course of one or several days. Depending on the size of the festival, all of the screenings may take place in a single theater or may involve multiple venues throughout a city. Festivals also include special events like panel discussions with filmmakers and actors. Typically, filmmakers submit their works to a festival, where a team of curators selects the best entries for inclusion in the festival. For independent and international filmmakers, festivals are often an important way to raise awareness of a film, generate an audience, and/or attract a studio to purchase the rights to distribute a film in a wider release. Acceptance into a major festival can add significant prestige to a film, with some festival awards (such as the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or) considered among the highest honors a film can receive.

There are many film festivals throughout the world, with some focusing on particular themes, such as highlighting LGBTQ films/filmmakers, specific cultural groups, or particular genres. While some of the more famous festivals may be in distant locations, there are hundreds of small festivals spread through every corner of the world and, increasingly, festivals are using streaming access to make it easier for the public to view their curated programs.

History of DocLands Documentary Film Festival

Presented by the California Film Institute, DocLands is a vibrant celebration of nonfiction storytelling held annually in Marin County, California. Expanding upon the exchange of ideas and inspiration through captivating screenings, networking, and engaging conversations, DocLands strives to foster dialogue, inspire connections, and

build an inclusive community around the art of documentary filmmaking. DocLands aims to illuminate filmmakers' diverse perspectives and ignite a passion for exploring real-world issues by showcasing compelling stories and the thought-provoking insights behind them. Join us as we embark on a journey to discover, connect, and celebrate the power of documentary cinema.



The Smith Rafael Film Center, home of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of a film festival? What are the benefits for filmmakers? For the audience? For the community?
2. How might the films at a festival differ from the films available to watch at your local movie theater?
3. What qualities do you think festival curators might look for in a film? If you are watching a festival film with a class/school group, what aspects of the film do you think made it appealing to the curators?

Get Involved!

Many film festivals, including the Mill Valley Film Festival, have student film categories. If you are a filmmaker, explore FilmFreeway (www.filmfreeway.com) for a database of worldwide film festivals where you can submit your film. The call for entries for MVFF opens in late February and closes in June. Youth filmmakers do not have to pay an entry fee. MVFF also offers many opportunities for volunteering. Find out more at <https://www.cafilm.org/volunteer/>.