

MVFF49

MILL VALLEY FILM FESTIVAL | 1-11 OCTOBER



CURRICULUM GUIDE
GRADES: 11-12 & COLLEGE

Name: _____



ADVISORY NOTE: Contains sexual content, strong language throughout, and depictions of a character's mental health struggles. Recommended for mature high school audiences (Grades 11-12 and College).

LETTER TO EDUCATORS

Dear educators,

Thank you for attending the 49th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival's screening of the Family Feature *BRIAN*. We are excited to welcome you to our 2026 fall season with a combination of both in-person screenings for local schools and online screenings for those of you joining us from afar.

We believe film is the literature of the 21st century: a universal language that helps students make sense of the world, and a powerful entry point into questions of ethics, identity, and active citizenship. This year's school screenings continue that focus and we think *BRIAN* will be a rich, engaging film text for your classroom.

This guide gives you everything you need to bring the film into your curriculum, including:

- Discussion prompts for small-group or whole-class dialogue on the film industry and the film itself.
- Common Core-aligned writing options for evidence-based essay prompts or a film review format, depending on your students' experience level.
- Thinking routines for before, during, and after viewing with a focus on social-emotional learning.
- Extension activities exploring the film as both art and cultural or political statement.
- A festival-context handout to help frame the screening experience for your class.

Thank you for the work you do. Enjoy the film!

Sincerely,
The CAFILM Education Team

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

1. Before you attend or screen the film: Hand out the Festival Context sheet so students know what a film festival is and why this screening matters.
2. Pick your discussion mode: Choose whole-class or small group prompts based on your time and class dynamic. Both formats work with the film industry angle, the specific film, or both and can be paired with the discussion notecatcher.
3. Choose a writing path: If students already write evidence-based essays, use the essay prompts. If not, try the film review format as a lower-lift alternative.
4. Layer in thinking routines: Assign the before, during, and after routines to deepen engagement. These double as social-emotional learning check-ins.
5. Extend if you have time: Use the extension activities for students who want to dig a little deeper into the film's social, cultural, or political dimensions further.

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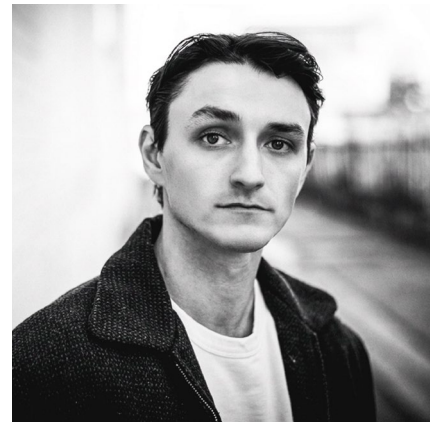
ABOUT THE FILM

"Today is going to be a good day," repeats Brian (Ben Wang) to his reflection in the mirror each morning before the usual day of disappointments and misunderstandings begins. Prone to frequent outbursts due to his mental health issues, the optimistic high-schooler and his good intentions often derail into comical calamity amidst run-ins with his brother, classmates, teachers, and therapist, who are all too familiar with his emotional flare-ups. When he accidentally self-sabotages his dreams of performing in the school play, Brian finds a new calling: running for senior class president. The movie soars on a murderers' row of crackling performances from some of comedy's finest talents, anchored by a superb, star-in-the-making Wang.

Armed with a sharply realized script from Late Night scribe Mike Scollins that deftly balances uproarious jokes with earned heartfelt insight, director Will Ropp's breakout hit of SXSW delivers one of the most memorable coming-of-age films in years.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER WILL ROPP

Will Ropp is a writer, director, and actor who makes his feature debut with *Brian*. Before stepping behind the camera, Ropp built a career in front of it as an actor. His film credits include *The Way Back* (2020), *The Fallout* (2021), *The Greatest Beer Run Ever* (2022), and what Ropp considers his finest work: a two-second appearance in *Joker: Folie À Deux* (2024) as "Joker Fan #1." On television, he has appeared in *Adults*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Dave*, *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, and *Love, Victor*.



FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

At its core, *BRIAN* is a coming-of-age story about learning how to survive yourself. About realizing that being "too much" isn't something to be ashamed of, it's something you learn to live alongside. I wanted to honor the kids, and adults, who walk around feeling like they missed a class everyone else took on how to be a normal person. This is the kind of movie I wanted when I was seventeen. So I made it now. My hope is that audiences recognize someone they love, or themselves, in Brian. That they laugh, cringe, and maybe feel a little less alone in this crazy, weird cosmic experience. And if nothing else, I hope it makes people laugh. I think we could all use a little more of that right now.

THE CALLBACK

ECHOES OF AN EPIGRAPH

"Today is going to be a good day."

FIRST ECHO | BEFORE VIEWING

- Choose a line from the movie.
- What do you think it means?
- What pictures pop into your mind?

SECOND ECHO | DURING VIEWING

- Keep your ears open for when this line shows up.
- Who says it?
- What is happening when it's said?

THIRD ECHO | AFTER VIEWING

- Think back to the line.
- Does it mean something new now?
- Why is it important to the story?

RIPPLES | STRETCH THE IDEA

- Let the line ripple out into your world.
- How does this line connect to you, your life, or other stories?

BEFORE VIEWING

ADMISSION TICKET | ANTICIPATION GUIDE

How to use this Pre-Viewing Activity:

Each of the following statements is related to one of the film's themes. Read each statement carefully. Mark whether you agree or disagree. Then, write a short explanation that defends your position. If there is time after watching the film, revisit these ideas to see how your perspectives may have changed.

Agree	Statement	Disagree
	It's easier to be brave when you're pretending to be someone else.	
	Practicing something in a low-stakes setting doesn't really prepare you for when it matters for real.	
	Being seen as an individual is scarier than being seen as part of a group.	
	Claiming an identity in public - a belief, a position, a self - always costs something.	
	Popularity is a fair measure of who deserves to lead.	
	The most persuasive speech isn't necessarily the most honest one.	
	You can tell who someone really is by what they do once no one is rehearsing anymore.	
	Losing at something you finally do for real matters more than winning at something you are only pretending to care about.	

DURING VIEWING

REHEARSAL & REALITY TRACKER

Introduction:

The film you are about to watch is about a kid with a forgettable name who spends his time at school rehearsing other people's words and imitating their courage before he can access his own. Every major beat - from auditioning for a play, reading in class, playing a game in gym class - is structured as a practice run for the real thing - building a political campaign platform for inclusion. The throughline is that Brian is always in character, until he isn't.

How to use this Thinking Routine:

The film's four central rehearsals are seeded below, with their real-stakes counterpart already filled in. As you watch, add what Brian borrows from others to get through each rehearsal, what's different once it's real, and any line or image that stuck. Use the two blank rows for any other rehearsal/reality pairs you notice.

Rehearsal Moment	What Brian Borrows	The Real Version When it Counts	What's Different for Brian	Moment That Stuck
Auditioning for <i>Julius Caesar</i>		Ambition, Betrayal, & the Mob Having to actually speak in public and be judged.		
Reading <i>The Crucible</i> in Class		Reputation & The fear of Being Seen Wrong Having to publicly claim an identity and defend it.		
Practicing a Campaign Speech		The Literal Claim Actually running for something and winning or losing in the process of being heard.		
Playing Dodgeball		The Metaphor Made Physical Actually being an individual target instead of hiding in the crowd.		

AFTER VIEWING

ROLL CREDITS | EXIT TICKET

How to Use this Post-Viewing Activity:

Before any discussion begins, give students a quiet minute. Ask students to write silently without sharing out yet. Let this sit before moving into analysis. In the exit ticket, write:

- One word for how you feel right now.
- One image from the film you can't shake.
- One line - from a speech, a play, or an ordinary conversation - that resonated with you and you want to remember.

ADMIT ONE

ADMIT ONE



AFTER VIEWING

MY REHEARSAL & MY REALITY

How to use this Post-Viewing Activity:

Brian spent the film rehearsing a version of himself he thought people wanted - until reality finally caught up. Think about a time that you have done that too. Fill in one moment from your own life for each side.

Rehearsal Moment	Reality Moment
A time you performed a version of yourself - said the expected line, wore the expected face, played it safe so you'd be liked or accepted. What was the "script" you were following?	A time you were actually, fully seen - someone caught the real you, or you let them, and it went okay - or even great. What made it possible to drop the "script?"
Director's Note One Sentence If you could go back and give your "rehearsal" self one piece of direction, what would it be?	



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

HEADINGS & HIGHLIGHTS

Pick your discussion mode:

Choose whole-class or small group prompts based on your time and class dynamic. Both formats work and can be paired with the discussion notecatcher that follows.

Movie Moments that Moved Me

- Describe a moment or a scene in the film that you found particularly surprising, disturbing, moving, conflicting, or confusing.
- What made this moment so powerful or compelling for you? Was it the story, the acting, the dialogue, the visuals, the soundtrack, or something else?
- How did this moment change the way you saw a character, situation, issue, or theme in the movie?
- How does the moment connect to bigger ideas?
- If you were explaining this moment to someone who hasn't seen the film, how would you describe why it matters?

Rehearsal vs. Reality

- Name two rehearsal moments in the film - a play audition, a class reading, a practiced speech, or a game - and the real moment each one turns out to prepare Brian for.
- Pick one rehearsal/reality pair from your viewing tracker. What does Brian borrow - words, posture, someone else's courage - to get through the rehearsal? What happens once he no longer has that to lean on?
- The film structures nearly every scene as a practice run for something more real. Is rehearsal shown as something that actually prepares Brian, or as a way of avoiding the real thing for as long as possible?

Identity & Being Seen

- The film's own logline calls Brian's name "forgettable." What does that suggest about how he sees himself at the start?
- Compare how Brian claims an identity in the safety of reading *The Crucible* in class versus how he does - or doesn't - claim one in his own life. Where is the gap?
- What does it cost Brian, specifically, the first time he is seen and known as himself rather than a character or a name in a crowd?

Persuasion & Rhetoric

- Pull one line from Brian's practiced campaign speech versus one line from the speech he actually gives when it counts. What changed?
- Track how Brian's persuasive voice changes from the rehearsed version to the real one. What does he learn about ethos, pathos, logos, and finally kairos along the way?
- Analyze Brian's real campaign speech - not the rehearsal - rhetorically. Does his persuasion finally sound like him, or is it still borrowed from someone else?

Individuality vs. the Crowd

- Describe what happens to Brian in the dodgeball scene. Is he hiding in the crowd, or singled out from it?
- Why does a simple gym-class game carry so much weight in this story? What does being an individual target cost Brian that hiding in a crowd doesn't?
- The film pairs a gym game with something as serious as a school election. What does that pairing suggest about how the film defines courage?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

HEADINGS & HIGHLIGHTS

Ambition and Relationships

- Name one friendship or relationship that changes because Brian starts trying to be seen, rather than staying forgettable.
- How does Brian's growing ambition to win - or to be known - test his loyalty to those closest to him?
- Does the film argue that becoming visible to the people who knew you when you were invisible can coexist - or that one always costs the other?

Growth - The Coming of Age Arc

- What is different about Brian in the film's final scene compared to its opening scene? Name two concrete changes.
- Of all the rehearsals - the play, *The Crucible*, the campaign, dodgeball - which one actually teaches him something, and which turns out to be just practice?
- The logline says Brian spends a semester rehearsing other people's courage until he has to find his own. At what exact moment does the film mark that shift, and how do you know it's real and not one more performance?



DISCUSSION NOTECATCHER

How to use this Thinking Routine:

Discuss the questions in small groups and record the ideas that come up in conversation. Be prepared to share what you take away with the whole class.

IDEAS I HEARD DURING DISCUSSION

MIND-POP IDEAS

Ideas that came to my mind during discussion.

ONE IMPORTANT THING I LEARNED DURING DISCUSSION

ESSAY OPTIONS

Write a thesis-driven essay that argues a claim about the film. Choose from one of the following angles and clearly address the prompt.

- Use a formal, academic voice.
- Use textual evidence from the film to support your argument.
- Connect the film's message to bigger ideas we discussed in class, or to real-world issues.
- Show that you've thought about the film by explaining why the topic is important or how different people might see it in different ways.

Analytical - Choose two rehearsal/reality pairs from the film and analyze what Brian borrows in the rehearsal and what he has to supply on his own when it counts for real.

Argumentative - Is rehearsal in this film something that prepares Brian for real courage, or something that lets him avoid it? Take a position and defend it using scenes from the film.

Personal/Reflective - Describe a time you practiced being brave - a lower stakes version of something - before you had to do the real thing. How did the practice help or fail to help?

Comparative/Research - Research a real example of a young person claiming a public identity or voice for the first time - a young activist, performer, or political candidate. Compare the pressure they faced to Brian's experience of becoming visible.

Creative/Speculative - Write a scene set ten years after the film ends. Brian, no longer forgettable, is asked to give a toast, a eulogy, or a public statement with real stakes. Does he still reach for someone else's words - or has he found his own?



FILM REVIEW OPTION

WRITING ALTERNATIVE TO STANDARDS-ALIGNED ESSAY

Evaluate the film for a reader deciding whether to watch it.

- Use a public-facing, engaging voice, like a critic's column.
- Use textual evidence from the film to support your evaluation.
- Tell the reader what the film does and how well it does it.
- Avoid plot summary. Remember this is an evaluation, not a recap.

Suggested Structure

1. The Hook (1-2 sentences)

Open up with something that captures the film's tone, stakes, or striking moment.

2. The Setup (2-3 sentences)

Give a brief, non-spoiler context. This could include the genre, premise, who's involved, and where or when it's set. Offer just enough for a reader to know what kind of film this is - not a scene-by-scene summary.

3. The Evaluation - The Core of the Review (3-5 short paragraphs)

Each paragraph makes a specific claim about one element of the craft, backed by a concrete detail from the film.

- Story/Structure - pacing, plot choices, whether the narrative earns its ending.
- Character/Performance - acting choices, character development.
- Direction/Visual Style - cinematography, editing, use of color or sound.
- Themes - what the film seems to be about beneath the plot.

Craft Choices - anything unique or distinctive like music, special effects, dialogue, or structure.

4. The Verdict (2-3 sentences)

A clear direct judgment about who should see this film and why or why not. This is the payoff the reader came for.

5. Optional - Rating or Recommendation Line

A star rating, letter grade, or one-line recommendation that synthesizes the judgment into a single, punchy statement that resonates with the reader.



EXTENSION ACTIVITY

VISION BOARD

Introduction:

A vision board is a visual collage of pictures, words, and quotes that represent your goals, dreams, and desired life milestones. It serves as a motivational roadmap and a daily reminder of what you want to achieve in your personal or professional life.

How it Works:

- **Focuses Attention:** It helps you spot real-world opportunities that align with your goals.
- **Inspires Action:** Looking at the images daily helps keep your priorities clear so you can take consistent steps toward making them a reality.
- **Clarifies Values:** The process of choosing images compels you to define what you truly want rather than what others expect of you.

What to Include:

- **Images:** Pictures of places you want to travel, career milestones, or activities you want to try.
- **Words and Quotes:** Inspiring phrases, mantras, or specific affirmations.
- **Identity Markers:** Visuals that represent the kind of person you want to become or habits you want to build.



EXTENSION ACTIVITY

CAMPAIGN SPEECH

Introduction:

Brian's campaign lives or dies on his ability to persuade. Effective persuasion isn't just deploying ethos, logos, and pathos - it also reads the moment, so the argument lands with a real audience, right now. This extension activity puts students in Brian's position. Using their own Rhetorical Appeals Tracker as a model, students write and deliver a campaign speech for a real, specific issue in their own school.

Topic & Directions:

"Everyone's talking about inclusion these days, so I care about it too." Everyone could argue for inclusion, because "studies show inclusive schools have better outcomes for every student," or each student selects a real issue at this school.

1. **Build it** - Construct an original campaign platform that deliberately uses ethos, logos, and pathos on purpose. Then add kairos, arguing why this moment, not just this issue, is what makes the platform land. Draft one line per appeal in the builder, then blend the four together into a campaign speech.

Appeal	Your line ideas	Why this works on this audience right now
Ethos Credibility - why should this audience trust the speaker?		
Pathos Emotion - what feeling will the audience walk away with?		
Logos Logic - what evidence or reasoning backs your claim?		
Kairos Timing - why does this argument land with this audience right now, not last year, or next?		

2. **Deliver it** - Rehearse your speech and deliver it to the class. This is the target for everyone, the practice of saying it out loud.
3. **Run with it** - Turn this platform into a real candidacy for student government and actual election at this school. This target is optional.

STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1

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.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.



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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ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS

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 Mill Valley Film Festival

Since founding the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1977, Executive Director Mark Fishkin has shepherded this once small, three-day showcase into an eleven-day, internationally acclaimed cinema event presenting a wide variety of new films from around the world in an engaged, community setting.

The festival has an impressive track record of launching new films and new filmmakers, and has earned a reputation as a filmmakers' festival by celebrating the best in American independent and foreign films, alongside high-profile and prestigious award contenders. The relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere surrounding MVFF, gives filmmakers and audiences alike the opportunity to share their work and experiences in a collaborative and convivial setting.

Each year the festival welcomes more than 200 filmmakers, representing more than 50 countries. Screening sections include world

cinema, US cinema, documentaries, family films, and shorts programs. Annual festival initiatives include Active Cinema, a forum for films that aim to engage audiences and transform ideas into action; Mind the Gap, a platform for inclusion and equity; and ¡Viva el Cine!, a showcase of Latin American and Spanish-language films.. Festival guests also enjoy an exciting selection of Tributes, Spotlights and Galas throughout the program.



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 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.