

# HOLLYWOOD OR *History?*

AN INQUIRY-BASED STRATEGY FOR USING  
FILM TO TEACH UNITED STATES HISTORY



edited by  
**Scott L. Roberts | Charles Elfer**

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# Contents

Problems and Possibilities of Teaching With Film.....	vii
<b>1</b> Beginnings to 1620.....	1
Debunking Myths in U.S. History: Will the Real Story of Pocahontas Please Rise?.....	3
<i>Nancy Sardone</i>	
<i>The New World, Gender Roles, and Issues of Point-of-View</i> .....	15
<i>Anne A. Perry</i>	
<b>2</b> Colonization and Settlement.....	35
Pocahontas Saves John Smith .....	37
<i>Kristin Wolber</i>	
Myth Busters: The Salem Witch Trials .....	44
<i>Brianna Scatorchia and Nancy Sardone</i>	
<b>3</b> Revolution and the New Nation .....	55
The Various Roles of African Americans in the American Revolution.....	57
<i>Paul J. Yoder, Katrina Yoder, and Aaron P. Johnson</i>	
Contributions of African Americans During the Revolutionary War .....	63
<i>Ryan Warriner</i>	
<b>4</b> Expansion and Reform .....	71
John Henry vs. the Machine .....	73
<i>Kristal Curry</i>	
<i>Twelve Years a Slave: Using Film to Explore Freedom and (In)Humanity</i> .....	80
<i>Gregory and Amy Samuels</i>	
<b>5</b> The Civil War and Reconstruction.....	93
Did He Really Create the Great Lakes? Tall Tales and Their Place in History.....	95
<i>Megan Cullen</i>	
Portrayals of American Slavery in Film: A Study of <i>Gone With the Wind</i> , <i>Roots</i> , and <i>Unchained Memories</i> .....	103
<i>Dennis Urban</i>	

6	The Development of the Industrial United States.....	111
	Women and the Wild, Wild West.....	113
	<i>James Nunez</i>	
	The Ox Bow Incident: A Historiographical Lesson in Vigilantism and Due Process.....	137
	<i>Michael Lovorn</i>	
7	The Emergence of the Modern Era.....	153
	Suffragettes Parade for the Vote.....	155
	<i>Michele Celani and Elizabeth Blackmon</i>	
	The <i>Iron Jawed Angels</i> and the Fight for Women’s Suffrage.....	164
	<i>Wendy Rouse</i>	
8	The Great Depression and World War II.....	181
	The Economic and Social Effects of the Dust Bowl.....	183
	<i>Rebecca Bidwell</i>	
	“The Greater Good”: Using <i>Flags of Our Fathers</i> for Critical Thinking and Historical Inquiry.....	194
	<i>Mark Percy</i>	
9	Post War United States.....	203
	Rosa’s Refusal: Serendipity or Sustained Activism? .....	205
	<i>Eric Groce and Theresa Redmond</i>	
	Chicano Power and Youth Resistance: Walking Out for Civil Rights .....	222
	<i>Tim Monreal</i>	
10	Post War United States.....	231
	Amish Neighbors .....	233
	<i>Ronald Morris</i>	
	Exploring <i>The Lives of Others</i> in the Social Studies Classroom: Where Dissent and Technology Intersect in Contemporary America.....	240
	<i>Rory P. Tannebaum</i>	
A	Little Round Top.....	251
	<i>Scott L. Roberts, Charles J. Elfer, and Brian Fahey</i>	
B	Using Film to Analyze the “Seen and Unseen” of the Leo Frank Case .....	259
	<i>Scott L. Roberts and Charles J. Elfer</i>	
C	Bootleggers, Borders, and the Untouchables.....	267
	<i>Charles J. Elfer and Scott L. Roberts</i>	
	About the Contributors.....	277

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# Problems and Possibilities of Teaching with Film

Teaching and learning through Hollywood, or commercial, film productions is anything but a new approach and has been something of a mainstay in the American classroom for nearly a century. An indication of the longevity of film as a pedagogical tool, Thomas Edison once famously forecast “. . . that the motion picture projector might well replace the need for teachers and other instructional leaders” (Ball & Byrnes, 1960, p. 127). Edison’s predictive powers proved to be less than accurate, of course, but the installation of film as a fixture in classrooms is undeniable, as the permanence of film in the research literature clearly attests (e.g., Dale & Ramseyer, 1937; Hoban & van Ormer, 1970; Horley, 1949; O’Connor & Jackson, 1974; Young, 1926).

Although the value of film as a pedagogical tool is applicable across the curricular spectrum, the special interest within social studies and history education is noteworthy. Teaching with film in the history classroom is ubiquitous, nearly fundamental to the suite of instructional resources that teachers and professors possess. Russell (2012) reports, for example, that in a study of social studies teachers’ use of film, 100 percent claimed to use a movie at least once per month to teach content and concepts (p. 22). Going further, Marcus and Stoddard (2007) found that 71% of the high school social studies teachers that they surveyed used some portion of a Hollywood feature film in their classes at least “a few times a week” (p. 309). The expanded access to internet video sites that many teachers have come to enjoy and rely upon (e.g., YouTube—<http://www.youtube.com/>, TeacherTube—<http://www.teachertube.com>) suggests that social studies educators may be using selected clips from commercial films in their teaching more often than ever before, a function of availability, ease of use, and the nature of the subject matter itself.

Not only is film a common pedagogical apparatus, but there is also growing evidence to support its value and utility instructionally. In his guidebook for teachers of history and social studies, for instance, Russell (2007) highlights a number of possibilities which he believes



characterize educational applications of film. While not exhaustive, among the beneficial attributes identified by Russell were the promotion of active viewership, higher order thinking skills, creative thought and inventiveness, and enhanced interest in historical figures and content (pp. 1–2). Others note that film has the special capacity to capture the student viewers' attention and to promote curiosity (Briley, 2002; Metzger, 2010). Moreover, a number of scholars have commented on the applicability of film to the teaching of sensitive and critical social studies content. Donnelly (2006) for instance, has reported that within the domain of Holocaust education the use of film to teach such critical and challenging historical subject matter holds as much utility and impact as guest speakers in the eyes of many educators. Similarly, Scheiner-Fischer and Russell (2012) have elsewhere argued that film is uniquely well-suited to the task of promoting gender equity in history and social studies instruction. More recently, Buchanan's (2015) work with pre-service social studies teachers suggests that film, particularly documentary film, offers new and meaningful avenues for teaching about the Civil Rights Movement at the elementary level.

Purposeful and effective instruction through film is not problem-free, however, and there are many challenges that accompany classroom applications of Hollywood motion pictures. One of the most significant and well-documented obstacles surrounding the use of feature films in the classroom is that such texts necessarily reflect bias, and worse, are often unreliable sources of historical, geographical and cultural information (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001; Metzger, 2010; Meyerson & Paxton, 2007; Seixas 1993). Films contain inaccuracies, biases, and misrepresentations about the topic(s) portrayed, a feature that is perhaps inextricable and inherent. Illustrations of this reality are evidenced in recent Hollywood blockbusters such as *Argo* (2012), *Lincoln* (2012), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), to name but a few select examples. Given the near universal presence of inaccuracies, then, we reason that simply showing films to students without any sort of structured activity or rationale limits students' opportunities to develop sound understanding. More importantly, even in those instances where students are generally informed about the inaccuracies present within a given film before or after viewing it, if not provided with opportunities to critically evaluate, reflect, and engage with the content of the film directly, the exercise remains passive and generally limits the potential for deeper content understanding and skill development (Marcus, Paxton, & Meyerson, 2006; Metzger, 2010).

In response to the limitations associated with teaching through film, we sought to develop practical lesson ideas that might bridge gaps between theory and practice and assist teachers endeavoring to make effective use of film in their classrooms. We believe that film can serve as a powerful tool in the social studies classroom and if appropriately utilized can foster critical thinking and civic mindedness. The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework, adopted by the National Council for the Social Studies in 2013, represents a renewed and formalized emphasis on the perennial social studies goals of deep thinking, reading and writing. The C3 is comprehensive and ambitious. Moreover, we believe that as teachers endeavor to digest and implement the platform in schools and classrooms across the country, the desire for access to structured strategies that lead to more active and rigorous investigation in the social studies classroom will grow increasingly acute. Our hope is that the present text might play a small role in the larger project of supporting practitioners, specifically teachers of history, by offering a collection of classroom-ready tools designed to foster historical inquiry through the careful use of historically themed motion pictures and documentaries.

## The *Hollywood or History* Method

Through our collaborative work with both new and experienced teachers, we have developed and refined a classroom strategy that provides a structured and inquiry-based approach for viewing Hollywood feature films in the social studies classroom. This strategy, which we refer to as *Hollywood or History?*, bridges components of the C3 framework, specifically, deep reading, deep writing, and deep thinking, through a guided analysis of historical materials and historically-themed films. The strategy challenges teachers and students to evaluate competing claims, detect bias, and measure evidence from multiple sources with the goal of developing reasoned perspectives regarding the relative accuracy of commercially-produced motion pictures. By the end of a *Hollywood or History?* exercise, students are positioned to express those self-generated assessments, orally and in writing, by making claims about whether a film selection is 100% History (all fact), 100% Hollywood (all fiction) or somewhere in between. The *Hollywood or History?* approach is fundamentally a platform for historical inquiry and analytical-skill building.

As a practicing middle grades teacher of state history, Scott Roberts originally developed this strategy through his efforts to implement historical thinking in his classroom in a way that was approachable and engaging. Informed by the well-known work of Sam Wineberg as well as his appreciation for the television series *History vs. Hollywood*, Scott was able to make effective use of both topically relevant historical films and historical materials (primary and secondary sources) in a way that was developmentally appropriate for eighth grade students of state history. In designing and implementing several *Hollywood or History?* lessons in his own teaching space, he saw first-hand how well the strategy was received with his middle grades students and was encouraged by the motivation that the approach seemed to foster. Following these early successes, Scott went on to share the strategy at regional and state conferences and in staff development sessions. As he moved into teacher education and the role of social studies methods instructor, Scott introduced the approach to his preservice education students as a means of modeling effective approaches for using traditional pedagogical tools (e.g., textbooks, films, worksheets, lecture, etc.) in the social studies classroom. In an effort to show how these traditional tools can assist in teaching through the C3, Scott asked his students to participate in a hands-on *Hollywood or History?* lesson based on a clip from the movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939) (Roberts, 2014; Roberts & Wellereiter, 2015).

Encouraged by his early successes as a K–12 practitioner and teacher educator, Scott later shared his experiences with long-time colleague, Charles Elfer, who was also interested in best practices for using film in the social studies classroom. Since that time, their collaborative work on the subject has grown tremendously. Together, Scott and Charles have developed a collection of lesson ideas and classroom materials and have worked to share the *Hollywood or History?* framework throughout the United States at professional venues which include the Annual Meetings of the National Council for the Social Studies and the National Council for History Education, among other local and regional conferences (Elfer & Roberts, 2016; Roberts & Elfer, 2016; Roberts & Elfer, 2017a; Roberts & Elfer, 2018; Roberts, Elfer, Fahey, Barnhart, Droski, & Vincent, 2014a; Roberts, Elfer, Fahey, Barnhart, Droski, & Vincent, 2014b). Additionally, Roberts and Elfer have elaborated on illustrations of the approach and its effectiveness in a variety of professional journals, books and as published lesson plans (Elfer, Roberts, & Fahey, 2017; Roberts & Elfer, 2017b; Roberts & Wellereiter, 2015; Roberts, Elfer, & Fahey, 2014; Roberts, 2014). The feedback received has been generous and overwhelmingly positive and provides the impetus for the present text.

The *Hollywood or History?* approach represents a structured plan for the evaluation of film which incorporates the use of primary and secondary historical materials. Lesson materials themselves will necessarily vary from one lesson to the next as a function of topical

differences and student readiness; however, the procedures are largely consistent across applications. A detailed outline of those procedures is offered below in a step-by-step format for clarity. The procedures outlined here are incorporated throughout the text in each of the elementary and secondary-level exercises included.

### *Step One: Film Selection*

The first step in *Hollywood or History?* lesson plan development is generally to make the film selection. In the present text, we have drawn on the experiences of educators from a wide variety of educational contexts across the country. Within those examples, readers will find that contributors have paid close attention to ratings, availability, and historicity. Ratings are especially important, and while they will vary from one school context to the next, we offer our sincere caution to practitioners to ensure that the films incorporated into the classroom contain content that is consistent with the norms and expectations of the wider community served. Developmental appropriateness is, of course, an important consideration as well. While elements of the *Patriot* (2000) may be useful analytical material for some high school audiences, it may be that Disney's *Johnny Tremain* (1957) is better-fitted to the elementary-level student working through the American Revolution. Similarly, certain topics (e.g., slavery, holocaust and genocide, warfare) require careful attention. In addition to following ratings guidelines, we suggest that teachers also consider permission slips and/or administrative approvals should any ambiguities exist. And finally, selections should be made with the historicity of the film in mind, although this criteria is perhaps less rigid than readers might imagine. The goal in selection is to provide students with historical content as depicted through film, but equally important, if not more so, is the student evaluation of historical accuracy. With that in mind, it is not necessary that the film or documentary be error-free or even non-fiction, as those attributes ultimately provide the sort of fodder for analysis on which the *Hollywood or History?* approach is built. The *Patriot* (2000), for instance, is perhaps not the best film with regard to its historical accuracy, nor are most motion picture productions created for popular audiences. At the same time, however, there are elements of Mel Gibson's early American experience that could be useful. The amalgamation of characters, the costuming, the nature of relationships with Native American peoples, or the battle tactics, to highlight but a few elements, all represent useable content for review and analysis. All of this is to say that while historicity is an important consideration, *in-accuracies* are also potentially valuable in the effort to promote historical thinking in young people.

An assumption underlying the *Hollywood or History?* approach is that the presentation of full-length feature films is often inappropriate for classroom applications given the time constraints with which teachers must contend, not to mention the passive viewership that sometimes accompanies simply "watching movies" (Elfer & Roberts, 2017). With the above in mind, film clips are the preference in a *Hollywood or History?* lesson. We typically select clips that hover around three to five minutes in length in an effort to allow two viewings of the clip within a standard class period of 50 to 55 minutes. Time is an especially important consideration where there are subtle nuances to be detected and with students who are novice with regard to inquiry and analysis. The approach, however, is not intended to be overly rigid or fixed and in extended, more elaborate *Hollywood or History?* plans, clips might be longer, or, the exercise may contain multiple clips. Teacher discretion will guide those decisions.

In addition to the considerations highlighted above, film clip selections must also be informed by their relevance to the content curriculum standards. Scott is an advocate of beginning with the standard under study and moving forward from there to search out a relevant film clip. Charles, on the other hand, often tends towards beginning with a useable and engaging clip and then working to find linkages to the curriculum. Whichever preference suits

the reader, we do advocate for curriculum alignment and each of the illustrations provided in the present text are linked to a variety of state and national standards.

### *Step Two: Develop the Inquiry*

As is true of virtually all inquiry-based lessons, the center of the approach presented here is a good question. Once the film selection has been made, the second step in a *Hollywood or History?* exercise is to develop an interesting question or set of questions. As the showcased lessons demonstrate, a narrative describing the scene, the film and/or the historical moment under review often guides students into the inquiry (see Appendix A, B, and C). In a *Hollywood or History?* lesson, the fundamental question that students must answer is: Is the material depicted in the film 100% Hollywood (fiction), 100% History (fact), or somewhere in between? In many instances, that essential question will suffice as an overarching task for the inquiry. In other cases, however, teachers may elect to develop additional questions to guide the exercise. Additional questions may be especially useful for beginners who may not have a great deal of experience with analytical exercises like these and/or where the level of rigor is so high as to require additional scaffolds for students.

### *Step Three: Selection of Sources*

As the title would suggest, the crux of the *Hollywood or History?* strategy is film, or more precisely, a film clip. Equally important, however, is the careful selection of accompanying documents that serve to complicate, verify and/or challenge the film under review. As the lessons presented below will demonstrate, we often suggest bookending the film selection with one primary and one secondary source. In our experience in working with students and pre-service teachers in a variety of classroom contexts, we find that this approach (a) provides for an inquiry exercise that is suitable to a single classroom session, (b) reinforces primary and secondary materials as the core of historical work, and (c) is developmentally appropriate for a wide range of student audiences. As is true of many of the recommendations for practice provided in the present text, we invite teachers to scale-up their *Hollywood or History?* lessons in a way that is suitable to their student populations. In other words, providing a greater number of resources to further challenge student interpretations is more than appropriate.

For the secondary source, we generally suggest that developers use a school-adopted textbook. In the first place, the textbook is a resource that most schools and teachers have access to. Secondly, using the textbook potentially offers a valuable opportunity for students to challenge the authority of a resource that is sometimes and unfortunately presented as infallible. For a wide variety of reasons, textbooks are often packed with inaccuracies, omissions, and biases (Loewen, 1995). By incorporating the textbook in an inquiry exercise like this one, we find that students are in a better position to evaluate the textbook as a useful, if sometimes flawed and imperfect, academic resource.

Access to primary source materials has streamlined in recent decades. Given the proliferation of online collections, no longer is it incumbent upon teachers and historians to have physical records. The Library of Congress has a tremendous collection ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)), as does the National Archives ([www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov)). While not exhaustive, each of these web-based resources will be of tremendous assistance in the process of designing inquiry-based instructional activities. In addition to available web-based sources for materials, practitioners might also keep in mind the importance of resource type. Reports, letters, and other text-based documents are standard and are certainly viable options in a *Hollywood or History?* exercise. At the same time, we have also found much utility in political cartoons, photographs, and sound recordings. In short, the suggestion is simply that teachers work to include a variety of material formats in their planning for a strategy such as this one as it deepens exposure and

extends students' literacy skills. Lastly, a consideration of the nature of the documents selected deserves attention. In brief, the *Hollywood or History?* approach is perhaps most effective where there is ambiguity. Selecting resources that reinforce depictions from the film is certainly valid, but we also remind readers that creating conflict across the sources presented to students establishes an intellectual problem with which students must contend. Further, encountering and making sense of that problem is an incredibly valuable dimension of an inquiry-based format such as *Hollywood or History?*

*Step Four: Develop Student Supports*

Most of the *Hollywood or History?* exercises provided here include a graphic organizer which follows a template developed by Roberts (Roberts, 2014). As with other suggested practices, the exact format of the student support is completely flexible. What students do likely need, however, is some sort of support to organize their thoughts as they move through the exercise. In the template provided here, the graphic organizer contains a section in the header which introduces the inquiry exercise and the guiding question. Below the introductory material, are for equally-sized boxes, one each for observations and questions regarding the primary source, secondary source, and, of course, the film clip under study. Finally, below the notes section, there is a space for students to draft their appraisals of the film as 100% Hollywood, 100% History, or somewhere in between. In our experience, *Hollywood or History* is often a useful primer to document-based activities in the history classroom and the graphic organizer offers further support to novice students.

*Step Five: Show the Film & Review the Sources*

With documents and film clips carefully selected, the next step in the *Hollywood or History?* approach is simply to have students carefully review the collections of materials. In most cases, we recommend showing the film clip first. Much of the gravity, or hook, in the strategy centers on the medium of film, which, as noted at the outset, has the unique capacity to capture student attention and generate interest. In our ongoing collaboration with a community of practitioners, it is worth noting, a number of educators have suggested a flipped protocol, whereby the sources are examined first and then the film clip is reviewed once students have equipped themselves with the requisite understanding of the historical materials provided. Whichever method readers adopt, reviewing the film and primary and secondary materials represents the bulk of the lesson as it pertains to class time. Traditionally, we have organized our classes into small groups, but the exercise could also be treated as an individual activity. Similarly, and especially for younger students, readers may find benefit in a whole-class arrangement as a way of modeling the expected behavior and process.

*Step Six: Hollywood or History?*

Once students have had an opportunity to view the film and document collection, they should be invited to deliberate and prepare their evaluations regarding the relative accuracy of the clip. This portion of the exercise is straightforward, but students should be instructed to support their conclusions with evidence from the texts. In other words, whether students determine that the movie selection is 100% Hollywood, 100% History, or somewhere in middle, they should be able to draw on specific elements from the film and from the documents to justify those evaluations. There is no right or wrong, per se, as the primary goal here is to mobilize the evidence in support of conclusions. Also, whether individually or as a group, students can draft their statements in several sentences or in paragraph form. The graphic organizer highlighted above contains a space specifically for that purpose.

*Step Seven: Debriefing Activity and Extensions*

After students have had drafted their evidence-based determinations regarding the historical accuracy of the film clip, we suggest that teachers unpack the conclusions as a whole class. While there are a wide variety of strategies that might be used to accomplish this task, we have found that methods such as a Line of Contention are particularly well suited. A Line of Contention involves demarcating two opposing locations in the classroom as 100% Hollywood and 100% History, respectively. Once that line has been established, students are invited to situate themselves along the continuum. Then, after students have decided where on the line to stand, volunteers can be selected to justify their locations and, in doing so, express how they used the documents provided to come to those determinations. The Line of Contention is valuable in that it is non-binary and allows for a range of interpretations between the two extremes of 100% Hollywood and 100% History. Additionally, the method offers to students a visual representation of where their peers stand on the guiding questions and an aural account of how their peers used the various pieces of evidence to arrive at conclusions.

Following the Line of Contention exercise, or other whole-class debriefing activity, teachers have a number of options. In some instances, we assign an individual writing assignment, whereby students are asked to write a short essay for homework which details their personal understanding of the documents and the film after the small group and whole class portions of the lesson. Similarly, and as an extension, teachers might introduce additional documents that further challenge or confirm the film and resources encountered. Students can work to make sense of those new documents in class if time permits, or, as a part of a homework assignment.

**Layout of the Book***Chapter 1*

The first chapter of the book covers pre-Columbian *Beginnings through the 1620s*. Nancy Sardone offers elementary teachers a model for introducing historical inquiry to young people using clips from the Disney film *Pocahontas* (1995). A secondary level lesson from Anne Perry explores the Jamestown Colony through *The New World* (2005).

*Chapter 2*

The focus of Chapter 2 is *Colonization and Settlement*. An outgrowth of the popularity and availability of the Disney film *Pocahontas* (1995), Kristin Wolber offers elementary teachers a model for bringing historical inquiry into the classroom at the K–2 level in a collaborative whole group format. The elementary lesson is followed by Brianna Scatorchia and Nancy Sardone who provide a glimpse into the Salem Witch Trials. Designed for secondary-level students, the lesson considers three Hollywood productions, *The Simpsons* (1989– ), *Hocus Pocus* (1993), and *The Witchfinder General* (1968).

*Chapter 3*

Chapter 3 addresses *Revolution and the New Nation* and spans the The French and Indian War to the War of 1812. Paul J. Yoder, Katrina Yoder, and Aaron P. Johnson incorporate the PBS television series *Liberty Kids* (2002-2003) in their elementary lesson example and concentrate on Lord Dunmore's Proclamation regarding slavery and soldiery. Sampling from the same series for the secondary classroom, Ryan Warriner also address Lord Dunmore's Proclamation, but incorporates the work of American Poet Phillis Wheatley as a source to help examine African-American thoughts and beliefs about the Revolution.

#### Chapter 4

Chapter 4 examines *Expansion and Reform* between 1801 and 1861. For the elementary classroom, Kristal Curry samples from the Disney film *John Henry* (2000) and the film's portrayals of American life during a time of expansion and industrialization. Gregory and Amy Samuels provide a lesson example for secondary-level students from the Academy Award winning film *12 Years a Slave* (2013) which utilizes Solomon Northup's autobiography to determine the historical accuracy of the film.

#### Chapter 5

The *Civil War and Reconstruction* are the subjects of study in Chapter 5. Included in Chapter 5 is a lesson developed by Megan Cullen which utilized the Disney film *Paul Bunyan* (1958). The exercises asks students to analyze how the film portrays American life in the era of expansion and industrialization in the Great Lakes region during the war years and through Reconstruction. Additionally, Dennis Urban created a multi-source lesson plan for secondary-level students to review clips from *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Roots* (1977), and the documentary *Unchained Memories* (2003).

#### Chapter 6

Chapter 6 considers topics pertaining to the *Development of the Industrial United States* in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The elementary-level lesson plan for this chapter, written by James Nunez, focuses on four films: *Pioneer Woman* (1973), *Westward Women* (1951), *True Grit* (2010), and *McLintock!* (1963). Using a variety of primary and secondary sources students will analyze how the film portrays the treatment of women who traveled to and lived in the American West. Due to the fact that the era is often discussed in grades 5-8, Nunez also included lesson ideas designed specifically for middle-level students. In the second portion of the chapter, Michael Lovorn offers a lesson plan for secondary-level students using the film *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) which also portrays the American West. This plan also provides students with the opportunity to participate in collaborative learning activities that examine the concept of justice though discussion and journaling.

#### Chapter 7

The *Emergence of Modern America* between 1890 and 1930 is the focus of Chapter 7. The elementary lesson plan for this chapter was created by Michele Celani and Elizabeth Blackmon and draws on the film *Iron Jawed Angels* (2004) to evaluate women's suffrage. The secondary portion of the chapter is attributed to Wendy Rouse and also utilizes *Iron Jawed Angels* to broach the subject of women's rights.

#### Chapter 8

Chapter 8 explores the *Great Depression and World War II*. The elementary lesson plan for this chapter was written by Rebecca Bidwell and integrates clips from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). In the second part of the chapter, Mark Percy offers a lesson plan for secondary level students through the film *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and addresses the social concept of "the greater good."

#### Chapter 9

Chapter 9 address the Postwar United States and extends to the 1970s. The elementary lesson plan for this chapter, written by Eric Groce, and Theresa Redmond provide and lesson for elementary-aged students through the film *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002). Tim Monreal is credited with the secondary portion of the chapter, which examines the film *Walk Out* (2006).

## Chapter 10

The final chapter of the text considers the Contemporary United States. The elementary lesson plan for Chapter 10 draws from the film *Witness* (1985) and was written by Ronald Morris. The film portrays important social issues such as teamwork, bullying, and serving in the military. Rory P. Tannebaum provides a secondary level inquiry for students to explore the film *The Lives of Others* (2006). In this lesson, students will use the *History or Hollywood?* strategy to analyze primary and secondary sources about the Cold War and to debate the concept of “freedom of speech.”

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Beginnings to 1620

The topical focus for the first era in United States history explores the pre-Columbian Americas from the region’s prehistory to the founding of the Plymouth Colony in 1620. According to the National Center for History in Schools, some of the more important elements from this era that students are expected to master are the “comparative characteristics of societies in the Americas, Western Europe, and Western Africa that increasingly interacted after 1450” and the manner in which “. . .early European exploration and colonization resulted in cultural and ecological interactions among previously unconnected peoples” (UCLA, 2017, para. 1). There are several films that teachers might adopt to provide support for students learning about Beginnings to 1620 through the Hollywood and history approach. Some of our suggestions include: *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* (Salkind, Salkind, & Glen, 1992), *The Mayflower* (Wolfinger, 2006), *The New World* (Green & Malick, 2005), and *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995).

The *Hollywood or History?* lesson ideas for this chapter focus on the Disney-produced film *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) and *The New World* (Green & Malick, 2005). The elementary example, written by Nancy Sardone, offers early childhood teachers a model for introducing historical inquiry to young learners through the film *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 2005). Sardone offers a straightforward, step-by-step lesson that invites K–2 students a chance to develop inquiry skills in a collaborative whole-group format. In addition to showcasing the *Hollywood or History?* strategy to analyze the film, the lesson plan provides teachers with creative extensions and includes the creation of a shadow puppet show.

In the second portion of the chapter, Anne Perry provides secondary-level practitioners a *Hollywood or History?* lesson plan that explores the Jamestown Colony through the film *The New World* (Green and Malick, 2005). Perry also includes a variety of primary and secondary materials to facilitate student efforts in identifying the inaccuracies in Hollywood portrayals of both the colony and Pocahontas. Additionally, students are asked to examine the roles

## 2 ■ Hollywood or History?

of women and men during this time period, and to debate which is worse in our collective understanding of the past: bias or omission.

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# Debunking Myths in U.S. History

## *Will the Real Story of Pocahontas Please Rise?*

Nancy Sardone

**FILM:** *Pocahontas* (1995)

Grade	Subject	Topic
Kindergarten–5th grade	U.S. History	Using film and shadow puppetry to teach U.S. history.
Era Under Study		Estimated Time Needed for Lesson
Era 1: Beginnings–1620		1–2 lessons (Shadow puppet show is optional.)

### State and Common Core Standard and Description

State	Detailed Description of Each Standard You Are Discussing
California	K.6.2: Students will know the triumphs in American legends and historical accounts through the stories of such people as Pocahontas, George Washington, Booker T. Washington, Daniel Boone, and Benjamin Franklin.
New Jersey	6.1.4.D.12: Students will explain how folklore and the actions of famous historical and fictional characters from New Jersey and other regions of the United States contributed to the American national heritage.
Virginia	VS.3.G: Students will demonstrate knowledge of the first permanent English settlement in America by describing the interactions between the English settlers and the native peoples, including the contributions of Powhatan to the survival of the settlers.
Common Core	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.2 (Puppet Show): Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Common Core	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.9 (Essay): Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

## NCSS Core Themes and Description

Theme Number	Detailed Description of Each NCSS Theme You Are Incorporating
I. Culture	<b>Human beings create, learn, share, and adapt to culture.</b> The study of culture examines the socially transmitted beliefs, values, institutions, behaviors, traditions and way of life of a group of people; it also encompasses other cultural attributes and products, such as language, literature, music, arts and artifacts, and foods. Students come to understand that human cultures exhibit both similarities and differences, and they learn to see themselves both as individuals and as members of a particular culture that shares similarities with other cultural groups, but is also distinctive. In a multicultural, democratic society and globally connected world, students need to understand the multiple perspectives that derive from different cultural vantage points.

### Handouts/Materials/Web Links

#### *Handout/Materials:*

- Disney’s *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) film clips
- *Hollywood or History?* blank graphic organizer
- Specific passages from primary and secondary sources
- Chromebook computers (or equivalent) and headsets
- Projector and laptop for teacher’s instructional materials
- To create puppets/silhouettes:
  - Black card stock, chalk, small wooden dowels or pencils, scissors, tape, printer

#### *Web Links:*

- A. Link to Film Clip(s): *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995)
  - “Pocahontas & John Smith Kiss”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8Wy2xaSpI>
  - “Pocahontas—Savages part two & Pocahontas Sacrifice”  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5UcpNPLTDk>
- B. Primary Source:
  - Smith, C. (1608). *A true relation*. Retrieved from <http://www.americanjourneys.org/pdf/AJ-074.pdf>
- C. Secondary Sources:
  - Fritz, J. (1983). *The double life of Pocahontas*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.
  - Townsend, C. (2004). *Pocahontas and the Powhatan dilemma*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- D. Shadow Puppetry:
  - Example of a shadow puppet show: “The 3 Little Piggies—Shadow Puppets Film-Making Workshop”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCmFWJjc4RA>
  - Example of how to draw puppets: “How to Make a Shadow Puppet”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsdMqNIcrls>

- Example of Shadow Puppet Stage: “How to Make Your Own Shadow Puppet Theater”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hL28SkHf1g>

## Guiding Questions

*What should students know or understand at the completion of the unit or lesson?*

*All Grade Levels:*

- What is the importance of consulting both primary and secondary sources to corroborate or contradict information?
- How do historical characters like Pocahontas become American folklore, defined as a story that are *not* true but that many people have heard, read, or believe? What are the reasons why Disney created a romanticized version of the story, thereby creating a folklore culture?

## Important Vocabulary

*List all of the important indicators of achievement (important people, places, and events) and vocabulary that students will need to know at the conclusion of the lesson.*

**Contradict:** Assertion of the contrary or opposite; denial.

**Evidence:** That which tends to prove or disprove something; ground for belief; proof.

**Myth:** Any invented story, idea, or concept.

**Native American:** A member of the indigenous peoples of North America.

**Powhatan:** A member of any of the Indian tribes belonging to the Powhatan Confederacy, an alliance of Algonquian-speaking Virginia Indians in the Tidewater region of Virginia at the time English settlers landed at Jamestown in 1607. Also, the name of the chief of the confederacy, who led the main political and military power facing the early colonists; father of Pocahontas.

**Primary Source:** Pertaining to or being a firsthand account, original data, or based on direct knowledge.

**Secondary Source:** Pertaining to or being a derived or derivative account, an evaluation of original data, and so forth; not primary or original.

## Assessment Strategies

*Describe the assessments that will be used during the unit.*

*Formative Assessments:*

1. Students will complete a provided graphic organizer to compare and contrast the Disney film clips of *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) with primary and secondary sources, which addresses CCSS.ELA-Literacy RL.4.9 *Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.* Evaluate via rubric.
2. (OPTIONAL) To indicate their understanding of the difference between mythical and actual events, students will reenact mythical scene(s) from the *Pocahontas* (Pen-

6 ■ Hollywood or History?

tecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) film clips. Students will develop a paraphrased script and create characters for a shadow puppet show. At the end of the reenactment, students will orally state how the myth(s) compare to the historical truth. Shadow puppetry uses flat articulated figures (silhouettes) held between a source of light and a translucent screen. [*Note to teacher:* You can either create the stage used for all the shows or have students design their own stage for their show. See resources below in citation section.] This addresses CCSS.ELA-Literacy SL.4.2 *Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.* Evaluate via rubric.

*Summative Assessment:*

Students will consider reasons, in a half-page written essay why Disney created a romanticized version of the Pocahontas story, thereby creating a folklore culture that has become part of the American national heritage. This addresses the State Social Studies Standard. Evaluate via rubric.

**Project Evaluation Criteria**

	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.9 Graphic Organizer</b>	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.2 Shadow Puppet Show</b>	<b>State Social Studies Standard Essay</b>
Standards	<i>Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.</i>	<i>Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.</i>	<p>New Jersey 6.1.4.D.12 <i>Explain how folklore and the actions of famous historical and fictional characters from New Jersey and other regions of the United States contributed to the American national heritage.</i></p> <p>California K.6.2 <i>Students will know the triumphs in American legends and historical accounts through the stories of such people as Pocahontas, George Washington, Booker T. Washington, Daniel Boone, and Benjamin Franklin.</i></p> <p>Virginia VS.3.G <i>Students will demonstrate knowledge of the first permanent English settlement in America by describing the interactions between the English settlers and the native peoples, including the contributions of Powhatan to the survival of the settlers.</i></p>

<p><b>4</b> Advanced</p>	<p>The <b>graphic organizer</b> showed a thorough and accurate understanding of how to compare and contrast events in myths to the historical truth regarding the story of Pocahontas. It included a thorough answer to the <i>Hollywood or History</i> question, citing details to support claims.</p>	<p>The <b>shadow puppet show</b> used paraphrased text and information from the selected film clip, in script form, which clearly explained the Pocahontas myth. The puppet show included appropriate visuals to retell the myth. The historical truth was orally presented after the puppet show.</p>	<p>The <b>essay</b> contained a thoughtful and probable explanation of why Disney created a romanticized version of the Pocahontas story, thereby creating a folklore culture that has become part of the American national heritage.</p>
<p><b>3</b> Proficient</p>	<p>The <b>graphic organizer</b> showed a complete understanding of how to compare and contrast events in myths to the historical truth regarding the story of Pocahontas. It included a plausible answer to the <i>Hollywood or History</i> question, citing details to support claims.</p>	<p>The <b>shadow puppet show</b> used paraphrased text and information from the selected film clip, in script form, which explained the Pocahontas myth. The puppet show included appropriate visuals to retell the myth and the historical truth was orally presented after the puppet show.</p>	<p>The <b>essay</b> contained a probable explanation of why Disney created a romanticized version of the Pocahontas story, thereby creating a folklore culture that has become part of the American national heritage.</p>
<p><b>2</b> Nearing Proficient</p>	<p>The <b>graphic organizer</b> showed partial understanding of how to compare and contrast events to the historical truths regarding the story of Pocahontas. It included a partial answer to the <i>Hollywood or History</i> question, citing some details to support claims.</p>	<p>The <b>shadow puppet show</b> used paraphrased text and information from the film clip(s), in script form, which partially explained the chosen myth. The puppet show included appropriate visuals to retell the myth and the truth/partial truth was orally presented after the puppet show.</p>	<p>The <b>essay</b> contained a unique yet improbable explanation of why Disney created a romanticized version of the Pocahontas story, thereby creating a folklore culture that has become part of the American national heritage.</p>
<p><b>1</b> Novice</p>	<p>The <b>graphic organizer</b> showed serious misunderstanding of how to compare and contrast events to historical truths regarding the story of Pocahontas; AND/OR omitting the difference between myth and historical truth; AND/OR confused the myths and historical truths; AND/OR had little relevance to Pocahontas. It included a partial answer to the <i>Hollywood or History</i> question, citing some details to support claims.</p> <p><b>Graphic Organizer missing = automatic 0</b></p>	<p>The <b>shadow puppet show</b> used paraphrased text and information from the film clip(s), in partial script form, which attempted to retell the chosen Pocahontas myth; AND/OR the puppet show lacked appropriate visuals to display the story; AND/OR the truth was not presented after the puppet show.</p> <p><b>Puppet show not presented = automatic 0</b></p>	<p>The <b>essay</b> showed serious misunderstandings in knowing the difference between a myth and historical truth; AND/OR contained incoherent writing; AND/OR improbable or unrelated explanation of culture's role in creating myths.</p> <p><b>Essay missing = automatic 0</b></p>



## Teaching Strategies

5 min	True or False: Opening Discussion	10 min	Primary Source: Partner Read and Organizer	10 Time Remaining/ HMWK	Shadow Puppetry
10 min	Secondary Source: Partner Read and Organizer	10 min	Class Discussion and Connections  Decide on Accuracy 0–100%.		
10 min	Movie: Show clip and complete organizer.	<i>Times are highly flexible and should be adjusted according to number of sources used, length of introduction, period/block schedule, and so forth.</i>			

## Sparking Strategy/Warm-Up

### *Sparking Strategy (Lesson Introduction)*

The teacher asks students to close their eyes and imagine what a Native American looks like. S/he asks: *What image comes to mind? Do you imagine primitive, war-like, tribally dressed people?*

The teacher then presents photographs of Pocahontas asking students to identify the Pocahontas that is most familiar to them. S/he asks what they notice about the two images: *What is different? What is the same? How is Pocahontas dressed in each image?* Ask students to recall the story of Pocahontas. *How did they learn about the story of Pocahontas? In a book? Watching a film? A field trip to the Jamestown settlement?* Ask students to consider why American culture might have different representations of Pocahontas.

- *Disney*: See gallery of *Pocahontas* images to choose from (<http://princess.disney.com/pocahontas-photo-gallery>).
- *Virginia Historical Society*: The only life portrait of Pocahontas (1595–1617) and the only credible image of her, was engraved by Simon Van de Passe in 1616 while she was in England, and was published in John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia* in 1624 (<http://www.vahistorical.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/life-portrait-pocahontas>).

The teacher states that in the following lesson, students will compare and contrast the film version of *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) with primary and secondary sources to discover the historical truth as to what happened. Students will consider why myths exist in our culture, and how films often perpetuate myths, like Disney's *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995).

## Lesson Procedures

*In a numerical list, provide a step-by-step outline of what you plan to do in the lesson. Include questions you will ask the students and materials you will use.*

Prior to the lesson, the teacher may want to ask if there is anyone who has not yet seen the Disney film, *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995), and make arrangements for students to see the entire film, as needed. YouTube has the film available for rental or purchase (running time 1:21). See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bjji\\_I5BObQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bjji_I5BObQ)

*Outline:*

1. Ask students what they know about the Jamestown settlement and the Powhatans. [Some questions to ask: Where is Jamestown located? Who founded Jamestown? Who were the Powhatans?] Ask students to recall the source of their information. Make discussion notes on the board.
2. Divide class into pairs. Using Chromebook computers or similar, ask pairs of students to investigate the following secondary source website: (<https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/chronology-of-powhatan-indian-activity.htm>) and paraphrase the chronology of events that happened in the Jamestown settlement regarding the Powhatan Nation from pre-1607 to 1618. Review major events with students.
3. Tell students that they will be watching a series of clips from the *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) movie. Let them know that they need to view the clip as a historian rather than a casual movie viewer. Tell students they are to form a question about each clip to investigate later using primary and secondary sources. Discuss what primary and secondary sources are, and explain that they are used to help historians perform research to find the historical truth. Hand out blank *Hollywood or History* graphic organizers.
4. The teacher shows Clip 1:

**Clip 1:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_U8Wy2xaSpI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U8Wy2xaSpI)

*In this scene, Pocahontas and John Smith kiss while a warrior named Kocoom and a colonist observe. This sends Kocoom into a rage as he is Pocahontas' spouse, and he attacks John Smith with a knife. A colonist shoots and kills Kocoom. Smith is captured.*

The teacher uses talk aloud protocol stating that s/he needs to determine if the scene is the historical truth or a myth. S/he asks students for a research question and engages their responses. The teacher refines, or uses this research question:

**RQ1:** *Was John Smith captured because of a love triangle between him, Kocoom, and Pocahontas?*

Teacher asks students to write the RQ on the bottom *Hollywood or History* graphic organizer. S/he tells the students that s/he needs to consult a *primary* and a *secondary* source to determine the historical truth to be able to answer this question.

5. The teacher displays a passage from the *primary* source and reads it aloud. Copies are provided to students.

*A True Relation* (Captain John Smith, 1608) pages 43–44  
<http://www.americanjourneys.org/pdf/AJ-074.pdf>

**Paraphrased**

1608: We went ashore and within a quarter of an hour, I hear a loud cry and a hollowing of Indians. I was struck with an arrow on the right thigh; Indians drew their bows which I prevented in discharging a French pistol. 20 or 30 arrows were shot at me but fell short. I discharged my pistol and killed a few. They killed my group of men. They captured me.

6. The teacher displays a passage from the *secondary* source and reads it aloud. Copies are provided to students.

*The Double Life of Pocahontas* (Jean Fritz, 1983) page 16

**Paraphrased**

1607: Smith and others were on an expedition when they were surprised by a hunting party of Pamunkey Indians. They attacked; Smith fired back with his pistol and killed two Indians. Smith was captured.

7. The teacher reads the summary for **Clip 1**. Copies are provided to students.

**Film Clip 1:** *In this scene, Pocahontas and John Smith kiss while a warrior named Kocoom and a colonist observe. This sends Kocoom into a rage, and he attacks John Smith with a knife. The colonist shoots and kills Kocoom. Smith is captured.*

8. S/he asks questions aloud as a model for students' thinking: *Why is the film different from the primary and secondary sources? What is the truth?* S/he reads the RQ to students and asks for their input. The teacher engages students, asking for their evidence found in the primary and secondary sources. Students are instructed to write a response to the RQ on the bottom of their graphic organizer.

**RQ1:** *Was John Smith captured because of a love triangle between him, Kocoom, and Pocahontas?*

**Answer:** Smith was not captured because of a love triangle. The supposed love triangle between Smith, Kocoom, and Pocahontas did not exist.

9. (OPTIONAL) If time permits, another film clip can be shown:

**Clip 2:** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5UcpNPLTDk>

*In this scene, Pocahontas is seen running along the cliffs at top speed. She has heard that John Smith is going to be executed on top of the bluff at dawn, in front of an army of colonists who had come to rescue him and wage war on the Powhatan. Pocahontas proclaims her love for John Smith and saves him from death.*

The teacher uses talk aloud protocol stating that s/he needs to determine if the scene is the historical truth or a myth. S/he asks students for a research question and engages their responses. The teacher refines, or uses this research question:

**RQ2:** *Did Pocahontas save John Smith's life and proclaim her love for him in front of her father, Chief Powhatan?*

10. The teacher asks students to write the RQ on the bottom of the *Hollywood or History* graphic organizer. S/he tells the students that s/he needs to consult a *primary* and a *secondary* source to determine the historical truth to be able to answer this question.
11. The teacher displays a passage from the *primary* source and reads it aloud. Copies are provided to students.

*A True Relation* (Captain John Smith, 1608) page 69  
<http://www.americanjourneys.org/pdf/AJ-074.pdf>

**Paraphrased**

1608: Powhatan sends his daughter, a child of ten years old along with trusted messenger, Rawhunt. Rawhunt tells Smith how Powhatan loved and respected him. Powhatan sending his child to Smith has Smith musing that he thinks she was sent to him as a present.

12. The teacher displays a passage from the *secondary* source and reads it aloud. Copies are provided to students.

*Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (Camilla Townsend, 2004) pages 52–53

**Paraphrased**

Pocahontas was only about ten (10) years old at this time. In all of Smith's early writings from 1608 and 1612, he never wrote about the story of Pocahontas' profession of her love for Smith while saving him from death.

13. The teacher reads the summary for **Clip 2**. Copies are provided to students.

**Film Clip 2:** *In this scene, Pocahontas is seen running along the cliffs at top speed. She has heard that John Smith is going to be executed on top of the bluff at dawn, in front of an army of colonists who had come to rescue him and wage war on the Powhatan. Pocahontas proclaims her love for John Smith and saves him from death.*

14. The teacher asks questions aloud as a model for students' thinking: *Why is the film different from the primary and secondary sources? What is the truth?* S/he reads the RQ to students and asks for their input. The teacher engages students, asking for their evidence found in the primary and secondary sources. Students are instructed to write a response to the RQ on the bottom of their graphic organizer.

**RQ2:** *Did Pocahontas save John Smith's life and proclaim her love for him in front of her father, Chief Powhatan?*

**Answer:** Since John Smith was not held captive nor sentenced by Chief Powhatan to die, Pocahontas did not rescue Smith from death as suggested in the film. Pocahontas was a young girl.

15. Students are instructed to complete their graphic organizers. Answer the question—Is the Disney *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) film a Hollywood creation or is it history? Hand in. Evaluate via rubric.
16. [OPTIONAL] **Shadow Puppetry**  
Ask students what they know about shadow puppetry. Explain that it is an ancient art form, an old tradition having a long history in Southeast Asia. Show an example of a shadow puppet show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCmFWJjc4RA> [*Note to teacher:* See resources in first part of lesson plan.]
17. Tell students that they will be working in groups in the next portion of the lesson. They can choose a myth depicted in the Disney film of *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995). The goal is for students to develop a script, paraphrasing the film clip that perpetuates the myth. Students need to make or find paper cutouts of each character and then re-enact the myth for the rest of the class. At the end of their play, they are to state the historic truth. Evaluate via rubric.

## 12 ■ Hollywood or History?

### 18. **Essay**

Teacher states that students have learned through this lesson that the Disney film version had many historical inaccuracies of Pocahontas. Teacher asks students to consider reasons why this is so.

19. Teacher assigns a half-page essay to students to consider reasons why Disney created a romanticized version of the Pocahontas story, thereby creating a folklore culture that has become part of the American national heritage. This addresses the State Social Studies Standard. Evaluate via rubric.

## Differentiation

*Think about your students' skill levels, intelligences, and learning styles. How are you going to make this lesson meet the needs of all of your students?*

### *ESL Scaffolds/Interventions:*

Based on the level of English language fluency, the teacher might:

1. Fill in portions of the graphic organizer for the ELL student(s), lessening the textual requirement.
2. Provide a different format besides the film that perpetuates the myth and contains less words, such as in a comic book by Marvel Comics (1995), *Pocahontas I and II* <https://comicbookrealm.com/series/589/0/pocahontas-mini>

## Summarizing Strategies/Synthesizing Activity

*What strategies are you going to use to allow students to summarize what they learned in the lesson?*

### *Strategies We Will Use:*

Students will be constructing a graphic organizer, outlining the questionable areas represented in the film clips by forming a research question, and examining the primary/secondary sources. They will better understand the myth by paraphrasing and summarizing the fictional and historically accurate events that took place. They will use this information to construct an essay that considers the reasons why Disney created a romanticized version of the story, thereby creating a folklore culture that has become part of the American national heritage.

## References

*Are there any additional resources that might be relevant to your lesson? Are there sources that you need to reference? Please add any citations using APA style.*

### *Citations*

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### *Additional Resources*

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