FOR TEACHERS

THEMES

*Being Elmo* offers a rare peek inside the world of the Muppets by going inside one of its most famous characters and seeing who’s in control. Analyzing the development of the character through the life story of its creator, this unique story should inspire students to pursue their dreams and passions.

The film explores the following themes, which were drawn from the [NYS Social Studies and English Standards](#):

- Culture
- People, Places and Environments
- Civic Ideals and Practices
- Critical Analysis and Evaluation
- Social Interaction
- Information and Understanding

WHY WE PICKED THIS MOVIE

Film is a powerful medium that can inform, entertain, educate and serve as a catalyst for social change. Tribeca Youth Screening Series showcases the exciting work being produced in the independent film community. Films such as *Being Elmo* have been chosen for their educational relevance, but also for their cinematic merits, and provide students with access to documentary films, filmmakers, and subject matter not typically explored in mainstream Hollywood fare. In the process, they are introduced to new places and new ideas, and experience innovative approaches in storytelling that highlight and reinforce the skills and themes they are studying in their English Language Arts and Social Studies classes.

PREPARING YOUR CLASS

Preparing students to be critical viewers is different than simply having them watch a film. Critical viewing is about being able to examine the information that a film is giving you and ask meaningful questions about the information that you receive. One key step is having students read and complete the activities in the Study Guide (which they will receive at the screening). The following pre-screening activities will help your students engage with the film as critical viewers and prepare them to be active participants at the screening event and in the classroom work you do surrounding the film.

THE MODERATOR

Philip B. Swift is a filmmaker living and working in New York City. As Digital Filmmaking Artist-in-Residence with Young Audiences New York and as a Teaching Artist with the Tribeca Film Institute, Philip integrates the art of Filmmaking into public school classrooms throughout New York City. His short documentary *Sincerely, PV Reese* was shortlisted for the 2010 Vimeo Awards and was the opening night selection at the 2010 Akron Film Festival. He is currently in production on his first feature length documentary, *The Bubble—A Documentary Film About Celebration, FL* scheduled for release in 2012.
PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In preparation for viewing this film, you can have your students discuss some of the following questions:

• *Sesame Street* was said to be based on the diverse culture of New York City where not only people from all over the world come together, but also a place where it wouldn’t seem odd for Muppets to interact with humans. What is your relationship to *Sesame Street*? How is it like the street you grew up on? How is it different?

• Kevin Clash, the Muppeteer behind Elmo, appears to be a somewhat introverted individual who really shines when operating a Muppet. What do you find to be your creative outlet? How do you express yourself?

• The mentor/apprentice relationship really helped Kevin Clash to realize his dreams. Through his work in the beginning on Baltimore local television, to his current work on *Sesame Street*, there was always someone that saw his talent and supported his dream. What is your dream? Has anyone helped you to make it a reality or at least motivate you to pursue it?

• The effect that the Muppets has had on not only American culture, but the entire world is undeniable. Why do you think that is? What is it about these creations that speak to so many people regardless of their background?

RESEARCH IN ADVANCE

**Goal:** To help your students prepare to view *Being Elmo* by having them research and review key terms and film vocabulary.

**Time:** 30–60 minutes

**KEY TERMS**

Mentor
Apprentice
Felt
Seam
Hand puppet
Body Puppet
Marionette
Finger puppet

**FILM VOCABULARY**

Develop
Series
Pilot
Feature-length Film
Genre
PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

MENTOR/APPRENTICE

Goal: Students will write letters from both the mentor and apprentice perspective in order to further analyze and understand the importance of the mentor/apprentice relationship.
You will need: Computers or pens, loose-leaf paper/journals
Time: One class period/45–60 minutes

Outline:
• Begin with a discussion really breaking down the difference between the two roles. What does a mentor provide for an apprentice and what are the benefits of both people in this relationship. It is very important to understand that it is not only the mentor providing something in the situation, the apprentice often teaches the mentor something too.
• Writing Exercise: Students first write a letter to a mentor working in a field they are interested in pursuing. Details are very important. What is the field, why does it interest them, what could the apprentice provide the mentor in this situation? When complete, have the students write a response from the mentor explaining why, or perhaps why not, they would accept the apprentice while making sure to answer those questions posed in the first letter.

NOSTALGIA

Goal: Through discussion and debate, students will analyze the importance and purpose of nostalgia.
You will need: Computers or pens, loose-leaf paper/journals
Time: One half class period/20–30 minutes

Discussion: What is nostalgia? What do you remember from your childhood? What’s important and what’s not? Why are those things important and not important to you? Why are someone’s nostalgic memories different then others? Is it cultural? Geographical? Economical?

Debate: Based on the topics discussed, split the class in two with each side picking a contrasting nostalgic idea. Moderate a debate between the two groups about the “nostalgic value” of their idea. This could be as simple as skateboards vs. bicycles, Nintendo vs. Sega, Nickelodeon vs. Disney Channel, etc.

Reflection: Have the students write a short essay reflecting on points raised in the debate in an attempt to analyze the discussion on a deeper level.
POST-SCREENING LESSON PLANS

CHARACTER CREATION

**Goal:** Students will create their own Muppet character that symbolizes their own background and upbringing, possibly learning something new about themselves in the process.

**Time:** One class period/45–60 minutes

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

**You will need:** Computers with Internet access, pens, loose-leaf paper or journals

OUTLINE

**Discussion:** Examine different Muppet characters beyond their simple physical aspects and surface character traits. Cookie Monster eats cookies, but why and what purpose is he serving? The Count obviously teaches counting, but what else are his creators trying to teach you? Bert and Ernie are best friends living together but what are they teaching us about friendship and relationships?

**Character Creation:** Students will consider the answer to those questions as they create a simple profile of a Muppet of their own design and writing a character profile for their creation. Remember in *Being Elmo* when Kevin Clash and Kermit Love discussed the simple attributes that can be added to a Muppet to allow them to express emotions? Or when Kevin Clash was training the Muppeteers for the French version of *Sesame Street*? Consider all these things when creating your own unique Muppet.

**Character Design:** Students will draw their Muppet creation while further considering those aspects mentioned in the previous steps. Eyes, hair color, nose size, all of these are very important in truly creating a persona for their Muppet.

**Presentation:** Students will present their creation to the class and discuss where their Muppet might live, work, and play on *Sesame Street*.

Bonus points for those students who want to actually make their own Muppet at home and present it to the class upon completion.

**SIDEBAR:** Using the provided image, examine the eyes of different Muppets from *Sesame Street* and describe the emotion you feel when looking at them.
GOING FURTHER

These writing activities are meant to serve as a follow-up to the Pre-Screening Activities and the Lesson Plan. Assignments can be used as in-class writing activities, homework assignments, or the jumping off point for longer-term art, creative writing, or research projects.

JOURNALING FROM SESAME STREET

**Goal:** Hone writing and observational skills.  
**You will need:** Pen and pencil, journal, or paper  
**Time:** One half class period/20–30 minutes

Students will pretend that they visit Sesame Street, perhaps for an apprenticeship at Hooper’s market, or just to visit. What do they notice during their stay? A journal will be written cataloging their one-week trip, at least one entry per day, with an emphasis on analysis of the activities in the community rather than just an account of their time hanging out with Grover.

DOCUMENTARY INTERVIEW

**Goal:** Practice interviewing and speaking, develop understanding of documentary techniques (interviewing).  
**You will need:** Pen and pencil, journal, or paper  
**Time:** One class period/45–60 minutes

Experience the process of interviewing someone for a documentary by interviewing a family member on his or her experience with the Muppets. What are their memories of the iconic creatures? Did they have any impact on their life? If not, why not? Present the findings in class through a written paper or presentation.

ANIMATING THE INANIMATE

**Goal:** Develop creative skills.  
**You will need:** Whatever you have in the house  
**Time:** One class period/45–60 minutes

In Being Elmo, we see how easy it is for Jim Henson to bring life to something as simple as a sock. Challenge students to find a simple classroom or household item and bring it to life through puppeteering techniques seen in the film and then present their findings to the class.

We’d love to know how you are using these study guides in the classroom! Email youth@tribecafilminstitute.org to share lesson plans and ideas.