

Using Documentary Footage to Build Historical Questions and Inquiry

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In many classrooms, documentaries are treated as tools for delivering historical information quickly and efficiently. A clip is shown, a few questions are answered, and instruction quickly moves forward with the assumption that the documentary has explained the past clearly and completely.

However, documentaries can support something much deeper than content delivery.

When approached intentionally, documentary footage can help students develop historical questions, investigate interpretation, and engage in inquiry-based learning. Rather than treating documentaries as sources of finalized answers, teachers can use them to spark curiosity, raise new questions, and encourage students to investigate historical complexity.

This shift matters because historical thinking is not built through passive viewing alone.

Historians ask questions. Understanding of the past develops through investigation, interpretation, and the continual reevaluation of evidence. They examine evidence, compare interpretations, identify gaps in understanding, and continue investigating even when sources disagree or leave uncertainty unresolved.

Documentaries can help students practice those same habits of inquiry.

Even short documentary segments can prompt students to ask:

- Why is this event being interpreted this way?
- What perspectives are emphasized or minimized?
- What evidence supports this interpretation?
- What questions remain unanswered?
- What additional sources might deepen understanding?

Questions like these shift documentary analysis beyond observation and toward deeper inquiry.

Moving Beyond Passive Viewing

Documentaries are often approached as complete explanations of the past.

Narration, visuals, expert interviews, and historical footage can create the impression that documentaries present clear and finalized historical truth. As a result, attention may shift primarily toward recalling information rather than examining interpretation or uncertainty.

Inquiry changes that relationship. The goal is not simply to consume historical interpretation, but to investigate it.

Instead of asking students only to identify what happened, inquiry-based viewing encourages students to examine how documentaries construct understanding and what questions emerge from the evidence being presented.

This approach shifts documentary analysis from passive viewing toward active historical analysis.

Even when documentaries provide strong evidence or compelling interpretation, they rarely answer every historical question completely. Every documentary includes decisions about:

- What evidence to include
- Which perspectives to emphasize
- How events are framed
- What receives limited attention

These choices naturally create opportunities for inquiry.

How Documentary Footage Can Generate Inquiry

Documentaries often contain moments that invite deeper investigation.

A narrator may make a broad claim without fully explaining the evidence behind it. An interview may introduce a perspective that raises additional questions. Historical footage or photographs may reveal details that are not directly discussed. Different sources within the documentary may even suggest competing interpretations.

These moments can become powerful entry points for inquiry-based instruction.

For example, a documentary about westward expansion may reveal:

- Limited discussion of Native American perspectives
- Conflicting explanations for territorial expansion
- Differing interpretations of Manifest Destiny
- Emotional language used to describe settlement and conflict

Rather than immediately resolving those questions for students, teachers can use those moments to encourage further investigation.

Inquiry-based viewing encourages students to:

- Identify uncertainty

- Recognize incomplete interpretation
- Investigate conflicting perspectives
- Seek additional evidence
- Develop new historical questions

This process mirrors the investigative work historians engage in when interpreting the past.

Developing Strong Historical Questions

Not all questions support historical inquiry equally. The quality of historical inquiry often depends on the quality of the questions being asked.

Some questions focus primarily on factual recall:

- When did this event happen?
- Who participated in this event?
- Where did the event occur?

These questions may support foundational understanding, but inquiry-based documentary analysis requires deeper investigation.

Stronger historical questions encourage students to:

- Analyze interpretation
- Evaluate evidence
- Compare perspectives
- Investigate cause and effect
- Examine historical significance

For example:

Instead of asking:

- What happened during Reconstruction?

Students might ask:

- How do different documentaries interpret the successes and failures of Reconstruction?

Instead of asking:

- What was the purpose of westward expansion?

Students might ask:

- How do documentary perspectives shape understanding of westward expansion and its consequences?

These types of questions move students beyond information gathering and toward interpretation and investigation.

Supporting Inquiry Through Comparison

Comparison becomes one of the strongest tools for generating inquiry from documentary footage. Inquiry often deepens when students encounter competing interpretations or unresolved questions.

When students compare:

- multiple documentaries
- documentary clips and primary sources
- differing perspectives within the same documentary

they begin recognizing that historical interpretation is not fixed or universally agreed upon.

Comparison naturally encourages students to ask:

- Why do these sources differ?
- What evidence supports each interpretation?
- Which perspectives receive emphasis?
- What information may be missing?
- How does historical context shape interpretation?

These questions help students understand that historical knowledge develops through investigation and analysis rather than passive acceptance of a single account.

Inquiry and Historical Uncertainty

One of the most important aspects of historical inquiry is recognizing uncertainty.

Historical inquiry is sometimes misunderstood as a process with fixed and unquestionable answers. Documentary footage can unintentionally reinforce this belief when narration presents interpretation with confidence and authority.

However, many historical questions remain debated, incomplete, or open to reinterpretation.

Archaeological documentaries, for example, often demonstrate how interpretations of the past change when new evidence emerges. Different historians and archaeologists may interpret the

same evidence in different ways. New discoveries may challenge earlier conclusions or complicate accepted narratives.

Recognizing uncertainty does not weaken understanding of the past.

Instead, it helps students see that history is an active process of inquiry and interpretation, rather than a fixed collection of answers.

What Inquiry Looks Like in Practice

Imagine students are watching a documentary segment about the Fig Island shell rings along the South Carolina coast.

One documentary emphasizes daily life, foodways, and environmental adaptation. Another focuses more heavily on changing archaeological interpretations and the possibility that the shell rings reflected socially complex communities.

Rather than asking students simply to summarize the documentaries, a teacher asks:

- Why do the documentaries emphasize different interpretations?
- What evidence appears to support each interpretation?
- What questions about the shell rings remain unresolved?
- How might future discoveries change understanding of the site?

Additional archaeological evidence can then be compared across sources in order to deepen or complicate interpretation.

In this situation, documentary footage becomes the starting point for inquiry rather than the ending point of instruction.

Building Inquiry into Documentary Analysis

Teachers do not need to redesign entire lessons in order to support inquiry-based documentary analysis.

Small instructional shifts can significantly deepen inquiry during documentary analysis. Teachers can:

- Pause documentaries to discuss emerging questions
- Ask students to identify uncertainty or omission
- Compare documentary interpretations with additional sources
- Encourage students to generate their own historical questions
- Revisit earlier conclusions after examining new evidence

These strategies help students recognize that documentaries are not simply tools for presenting information. They are opportunities to investigate how historical understanding is constructed and revised.

Key Takeaway

Documentary footage can support historical inquiry when students move beyond passive viewing and begin questioning interpretation, evidence, and perspective.

Conclusion

Documentaries are most powerful instructionally when they encourage investigation rather than passive acceptance.

Using documentary footage to develop questions, compare interpretations, and investigate uncertainty encourages deeper historical inquiry.

Through inquiry-based analysis, documentaries become opportunities for students to question interpretation, evaluate evidence, and investigate how understanding of the past evolves over time.