



GRADES 6 - 12
CLASSROOM GUIDE

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TEACHING
THE FILM:

RBG is an inspiring feature documentary about the life and work of legendary Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. A class screening of the film may complement a U.S. history, government, or gender studies curriculum, and will encourage students to reflect on the importance of the judiciary in determining the rights of oppressed groups, in particular women. Taught in conjunction with this guide, RBG will challenge students to think critically about the history of sex discrimination and women’s rights in the United States. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as partisanship on the Supreme Court, checks and balances, activist judges, motherhood and working women, pop culture icons, and the #MeToo movement.

All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFILM Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of *RBG*.

Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercises, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

ABOUT THE FILM

While most Americans think of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as a progressive superhero and the beacon of left-leaning thinking on a court that veers ever-rightward, this raucous and informative documentary portrait reveals the complex history that brought her to this point. From her legal career as a pioneer of gender discrimination cases to her friendship with Antonin Scalia to her long and love-filled marriage, filmmakers West and Cohen reveal a deep thinker as well as an icon who lives up to her star billing.

“In Betsy West and Julie Cohen’s wide-ranging *RBG*, Ginsburg’s life — and its many lessons, both learned and taught — come to entertaining and energetic life. It’s a fist-pumping, crowd-pleasing documentary that makes one heck of a play to remind people of Ginsburg’s vitality and importance, now more than ever.” – Kate Erbland, IndieWire



Betsy West and Julie Cohen
 (USA, 2018) English, 97 min



Recommended Subject Areas:

- Gender Studies
- Government
- Law
- Political Science
- Political Studies
- U.S. History
- Women’s Studies
- World/Current Affairs



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

RBG takes place largely in the context of the judicial system. It may be helpful to review the three branches of government and discuss how the U.S. court system works. You can refer to the Supplemental Resources section of this guide for support materials.

- How are judges, and in particular Supreme Court Justices, appointed?
- What is the confirmation process?
- What do you know about laws that affect equality for women, minorities, and other oppressed groups?
- What rights relating to equality are there in the US Constitution?

Ruth Bader Ginsburg overcomes many odds to succeed as a law student, a lawyer, and then a judge. Before watching, ask students to consider their own experiences with discrimination.

- Have you or has anyone you know been told you cannot do something because of your race, gender, physical ability, or other difference? How did that make you feel, and what did you do in response?
- What do you think your life would be like if you were born fifty, a hundred, or two hundred years ago? How have things changed since then for women and minorities in this country?
- When you think of the adults who raised you, did gender impact what roles they performed regarding work, home life, and child care? How and why do you think that was?

DESCRIBE RUTH
BADER GINSBURG.
WHAT KIND OF
PERSON IS SHE?

POST VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Characters and Story

1. Describe Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

- What kind of person is she? What adjectives would you use to describe her?
- What qualities does she have which most enhanced her ability to succeed?
- What personal obstacles did she have to overcome?
- How has she changed throughout her life? How has she remained the same?
 - How does Ruth balance her work life and personal life? What are her interests, and how do those around her support her in striking this balance?
 - Ruth's political beliefs are liberal and progressive, and yet she was close friends with the late Justice Antonin Scalia, one of the most conservative justices on the Supreme Court. How do you explain their friendship? Could you be friends with someone who does not share your religious and/or political beliefs?

2. Describe Ruth Bader Ginsburg's family.

- How do you think Ruth's mother's death has impacted the rest of Ruth's life? What values did her mother instill in Ruth?
- What kind of person was her husband, Marty? What was his attitude toward Ruth's career and how did this affect her?
- What do you think it would be like to have Ruth as a mother? A grandmother? A friend?



POST VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Context

1. How has this film affected your opinion about the importance of the Supreme Court?

- What connections do you see between the landmark cases of the 1970's and 1980's and today's society?
- Why is it important to be familiar with the history of the Supreme Court and its decisions?
- What direction is the political climate heading today and what are the implications of this?

2. Ginsburg was nominated to the Supreme Court in

1993 by Democratic President Bill Clinton, after which there was a confirmation hearing and subsequent congressional vote to confirm the nomination. Often, such votes are split along party lines. Yet, despite Ginsburg's outspoken opinions in favor of abortion rights and equality for women, the vote was 96 to 3 in her favor.

- Why did she have almost unanimous bipartisan support from congress despite her strong views?
- What does this say about her as a person?
- Do you think this could happen in today's political climate? Why or why not?

3. As more conservative Justices have been appointed to the Supreme Court by Republican presidents, Ginsburg has increasingly disagreed with the majority opinions. She now often authors the dissenting opinion, and has come to be known as "The Dissenter."

- Some say that Ginsburg's dissenting opinions are more significant than her majority ones. How is this possible, since it means that her side lost?
- Why are dissenting opinions of the Supreme Court so important?
- What is an example from the film of the impact of a dissenting opinion?

3. Upon graduation from law school, Ruth's original plan did not include a focus on sex discrimination cases, and yet she wound up co-founding the Women's Rights Project of the ACLU and being one of the most influential proponents of ending legalized gender discrimination.

- How did Ruth's personal experiences lead her to focus on arguing sex discrimination cases?
- What strategies did she develop for taking on cases to argue before the Supreme Court? How effective were they?
- How has her dedication to ending discrimination continued in her role as Supreme Court Justice?

4. While the names of Supreme Court Justices may be familiar to some, no other Justice has attained the status of pop culture icon, complete with fan sites, merchandise, Halloween costumes, a recurring SNL character, tattoos, and memes.

- What led to Ruth's attainment of this status?
- How does she feel about her celebrity?
- Icon is defined as, "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of something." What does Ruth symbolize?

5. Supreme Court Justices are not supposed to openly discuss or advertise their opinions on political candidates. Yet prior to the 2016 election, Ruth Bader Ginsburg made highly critical remarks about Donald Trump, for which she later apologized.

- After more than twenty years as a Supreme Court Justice, why do you think Ruth did this?
- What do you think about her statements and her apology?
- What is your opinion on judges maintaining discretion about politics?

WHY ARE DISSENTING OPINIONS OF THE SUPREME COURT SO IMPORTANT?



Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1. Why do you think filmmakers Betsy West and Julie Cohen decided to make a film about Ruth Bader Ginsburg?
 - What is their attitude toward their subject and how is that conveyed?
 - Who is the intended audience and what is the film's message?
 - Would you say this film is biased or objective in its portrayal of Ruth Bader Ginsburg? How so?
2. Though viewers perceive a film as a seamless experience, it is actually an amalgam of hundreds of choices made by the filmmakers, and nothing is left to chance. What are some of the choices you noticed about how the film was made?
 - What is the overall emotional tone of the film, and how is this tone achieved?
 - Describe the effect of using archival footage, home movies, family photos, interviews, speeches, and audio from court cases.
 - What purpose did it serve to open the film with audio clips of insults directed at Justice Ginsburg?
3. During the course of the film we meet individuals directly impacted by Supreme Court decisions that Justice Ginsburg influenced as a lawyer or a judge, including Air Force Lieutenant Sharron Frontiero, widower and single parent Stephen Wiesenfeld, and VMI graduate Kelly Sullivan.
 - Why did the filmmakers choose to include these stories in the film?
 - How did hearing personal stories serve to illustrate the importance of the legal decisions?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITY

1. Stage a mock trial by selecting 9 Supreme Court Justices who will listen to arguments by “attorneys” debating controversial subjects such as gun control, sanctuary cities or random drug tests in schools. After the Justices vote, have them write majority and dissenting opinions and present the reports to the class.
2. Hold a debate of a controversial topic where half the class is assigned to argue from a “living document” Constitutional perspective and half from an “originalist” perspective.
3. Engage the class in an activity from the USCourts.gov website to further explore topics such as the separation of powers, balancing individual rights and public safety, the importance of the Constitution and Federalism. <http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/activities-supreme-court-activity>
4. Read one or more books about Ruth Bader Ginsburg listed in the Resources section of this guide, and compare them to the documentary. Which present a more well-rounded picture of this important person? What is left out of each?

Ten Supreme Court Cases Every Teenager Should Know Activity -- Present to the class Supreme Court cases concerning teenagers but do not reveal the decisions made by the Supreme Court until the students determine how they would have voted. Discuss what Constitutional law or amendment applied to the case. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20080915monday.html

California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson

- Grade 7: Standard 1.8 Analyze the effect on the viewer of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism; identify the techniques used to achieve the effects in each instance studied.
- Grade 8: Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's Henry V with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

California Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 9-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

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.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM

All Media Is Constructed.

- How is the message delivered and in what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements are used?
- What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?

AUTHOR

All Media Is Constructed by Someone.

- Who is delivering the message?
- Who originally constructed the message?
- What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?

CONTENT

Media Is A Language For Information.

- What is the subject of the media message?
- What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
- What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?
- To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

AUDIENCE

All Media Messages Reach an Audience.

- Who receives the message?
- For whom is the message intended?
- What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

PURPOSE

All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

- Why was the message constructed?
- Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
- To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
- What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?



THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895 The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

1900-1920 Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

1926 John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

1929 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

1935 Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

1960s The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

1988 The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

PRESENT DAY The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize

the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover, an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

The Film's Official Website

<https://www.rbgmovie.com/>

More on the Life and Work of Ruth Bader Ginsburg

From the ACLU Website: "Tribute The Legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and WRP Staff"

<https://www.aclu.org/other/tribute-legacy-ruth-bader-ginsburg-and-wrp-staff>

Ballotpedia Encyclopedia of American Politics Entry for Ruth Bader Ginsburg

https://ballotpedia.org/Ruth_Bader_Ginsburg

Women's History and Women's Rights

National Women's History Project: <http://www.nwhp.org/>

Discovering American Women's History Online: <http://digital.mtsu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/women>

A History of Women in Congress: <http://history.house.gov/Exhibition-and-Publications/WIC/Women-in-Congress/>

Timeline of Women's Rights in the U.S.:

<https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2017-01-20/timeline-the-womens-rights-movement-in-the-us>

Timeline of Major Supreme Court Decisions on Women's Rights:

<https://www.aclu.org/other/timeline-major-supreme-court-decisions-womens-rights>

Books

My Own Words by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, with Mary Hartnett and Wendy W. Williams. Simon & Schuster, 2016.

I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark by Debbie Levy, Illustrated by Elizabeth Baddeley. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2016. (picture book)

Ruth Bader Ginsburg: The Case for R.B.G. vs. Inequality by Jonah Winter, Illustrated by Stacy Innerst. Harry N. Abrams, 2017. (picture book)

Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg by Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik. Dey Street Books, 2015.

Variety



ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

Variety

January 25, 2018 by Amy Nicholson

This cheerful doc lionizes the notorious Supreme Court justice's inspiring arc from feminist lawyer to internet icon. Witch. Monster. Evil-doer. Zombie. In "RBG," a survey of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's impact on American law, documentary co-directors Julie Cohen and Betsy West open with a montage of insults endured by the 84-year-old judge. Audiences for this peppy portrait will dissent. To young fans who've slapped Ginsburg's face on T-shirts, coffee mugs and a million memes, she's a hero, icon, and rebel, the yas queen of the judicial branch better known for Kate McKinnon's "Saturday Night Live" impersonation than her hard-fought feminist victories.

"RBG" colors in that knowledge gap, showcasing the Ginsburg who argued for equal rights in front of the Supreme Court before "SNL" was even on the air. This spry celebration reveals that the real Ginsburg is neither beast nor badass, but an even-tempered, soft-spoken mediator—not typically the traits that inspire rousing high-fives, but qualities that honor the slow, uphill slog of positive change.

How would Ginsburg describe herself? First, as a Brooklynite, just like the Notorious RBG's nickname inspiration, The Notorious BIG. "We have a lot in common," nods Ginsburg, regarding the platinum-selling rapper who was murdered 20 years ago in an unsolved drive-by assassination. She's not joking, exactly. Ginsburg doesn't joke. Her daughter Jane confesses that she used to keep a journal called "Mommy Laughed," listing the rare moments she caught her mother cracking a smile. As for what else the two Notarati have in common, fans are fixated on their deaths — in Ginsburg's case, they're praying that she lives forever, which inspires Cohen and West to include several sequences of the 5-foot-1 grandmother pumping her 3-lb. barbells in a sweatshirt that reads "Super Diva." No, she doesn't do "girl push-ups."

Ginsburg's family calls her "Bubby" or "Kiki," the latter she earned as a baby who kicked her mother in the womb. She'd also call herself the daughter of immigrants, and her parents shaped her to be half the person she became: hard-working, feminine, polite. They weren't expecting her to be quite so careerist. Besides, when Ginsburg graduated in 1959, the Supreme Court had been exclusively male since the first "Oyez, oyez" in 1789. Any woman arguing a case before the judges had to walk up those marble steps, past the staring portraits of centuries of men, and boldly speak her mind.

But Ginsburg didn't strike anyone as bold, at least not outwardly. A blue-eyed beauty with no problem getting dates, she was expected to be a wife. She married her college sweetheart, Marty, and stayed happily wed until his death in 2010. Back then, almost no women went to law school, let alone qualified to join the Harvard review — which she did, while raising a toddler and nursing Marty through testicular cancer. "He was the first boy I ever knew who cared that I had a brain," says Ginsburg. Their love affair is the best part of the film. During her confirmation hearing in 1993, the strictly private Ginsburg lit up while describing her husband's respect for her career. The cameras capture his proud glow as he sits behind her. He was a charmer; she was ever serene. As a lawyer for the ACLU, her approach to swaying male judges was to talk to them like sensible people who would surely agree with her once they knew the facts. Ginsburg didn't believe they hated women — they just didn't think about them, and that was something she could change.

"RBG" can't enter Ginsburg's inner sanctum. It's stuck on the steps, merely able to peek in and reveal that she's a workaholic who loves opera. In a recent onstage cameo at the Washington National Opera, she relishes saying her snobbish character's name — "Krrrrrakenthorp!" she growls — and when she gets to the line, "Ours is a family wildly trumpeted," she punctuates the last word as though to make a point about a president she's confessed she dislikes. (The film concedes she probably should have kept that to herself.) Other details go unexplored, like the jingly ring Ginsburg wears on her left hand that dangles what look like five evil eyes. Perhaps someone could take that jewelry as proof of her wickedness. But this doc, and everyone likely to watch it, would never question her valor.