



Jim Henson Idea Man

STUDY GUIDE

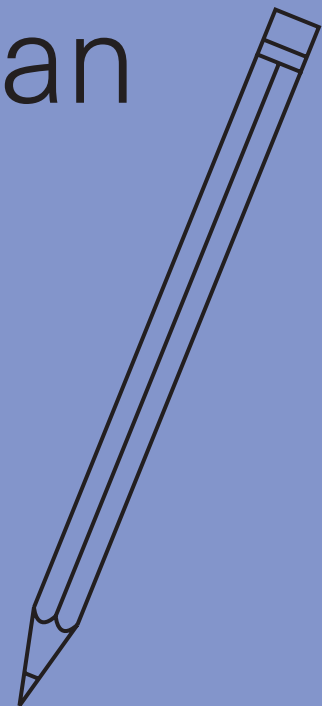
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All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy.

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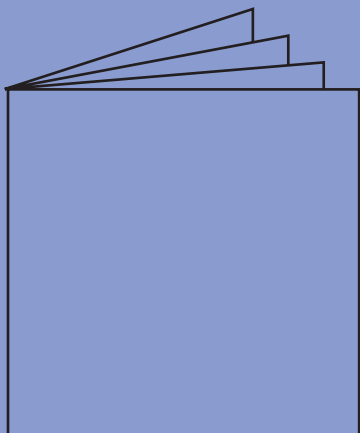
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About the Film

Jim Henson Idea Man takes us into the mind of this singular creative visionary, from his early years of puppeteering on local television to the worldwide success of **Sesame Street**, **The Muppet Show**, and beyond. Academy Award-winning filmmaker Ron Howard captures Henson's restless creativity, ambition, and artistic evolution in the style and spirit of his complex subject, an artist who revolutionized television, inspired generations, and created some of the world's most beloved characters, all while battling time and personal hardships. Featuring new interviews with Henson's closest collaborators and children, as well as never-before-seen materials from his personal archives—including home movies, photographs, sketches, and diaries—Howard brings us an entertaining and insightful look at a man whose boundless imagination changed the world.

DIRECTORS
Ron Howard

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
**Paul Crowder, Meredith Kaulfers,
Michael Rosenberg**

PRODUCERS
**Ron Howard, Brian Grazer, Sara
Bernstein, Margaret Bodde,
Justin Wilkes, Mark Monroe and
Christopher St. John**

(USA 2024), English, 108 min

Teaching the Film

Ron Howard's documentary **Jim Henson Idea Man** is a radically honest and inspiring documentary about the world-renowned puppeteer Jim Henson. Through intimate conversations with his family and the people he worked most closely with, the film follows the journey of his life from childhood to death and all his successes and mistakes along the way. The film touches upon the career-building of a puppeteer, his revolutionary work, and the unique impact he had on culture and media. A screening of this film will complement a curriculum in English Language Arts, Media Arts, and other subjects diving deep into the Jim Henson universe.

Recommended Grades: 5–12

Subject Areas

- **Art/Media**
- **Career Path Training**
- **Drama/Acting**
- **English Language Arts**



Pre-Viewing Topics

To prepare for a class screening of **Jim Henson Idea Man**, ask your students to consider their prior knowledge of Jim Henson, puppetry, and creative practices. The following prompts are to gain a better understanding of your student's understanding of the subjects covered in the film

- Have you heard of Sesame Street or the Muppets?
- Do you know who Jim Henson is?
- What do you think a puppeteer does? What do you think is the most difficult aspect of this job?
- How long do you think puppetry has been around?
- What is a creative practice you enjoy participating in?
- Is creating art individually different from creating art with a group of people?
- What is the impact of Jim's art on youth arts education?
- What are some sacrifices artists need to make in order to keep making art?



Presenter Bio



Ron Howard is an Academy Award-winning director and is one of Hollywood's most celebrated and prolific filmmakers. From the critically acclaimed Oscar-winning dramas **A Beautiful Mind** and **Apollo 13** to the hit comedies **Parenthood** and **Splash**, he has created some of Hollywood's most memorable films and series.

Howard's critically acclaimed film **A Beautiful Mind** earned him an Academy Award for Best Director and Best Picture, and also won for Best Screenplay and Best Supporting Actress. Howard has also been honored by numerous organizations and in March 2013, Howard was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame. In 2015, Howard was honored with a second star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, making him one of the select few to have been recognized with two stars. In 2023, **Apollo 13** was selected for the Library of Congress National Film Registry, a prestigious selection of films that are selected for cultural, historic or aesthetic importance.

Howard's next highly anticipated films include **Jim Henson Idea Man**, a documentary that will serve as the definitive portrait of Jim Henson's life, and **Eden**, a survival thriller based on the 1930s real-life unsolved murders in the Galapagos Islands.



Discussion Questions

Jim Henson and the Muppets:

1. Why do you think the Muppets or Sesame Street have such a long-lasting legacy in media and culture (54 seasons since 1969) despite seemingly being “just for kids”?
2. Jim Henson passed away early from overworking. Brainstorm ideas of how you can incorporate balance and time for rest into your daily routine. Why are these practices important?
3. Is puppetry an art form or a technical skill? Why?
4. Jim Henson revolutionized entertainment by combining television and puppets. What is a combination you believe would be the next artistic or creative innovation?

Creating Art:

1. Jim Henson’s creative universe spanned from TV to film to commercials and beyond. How do you think artists can keep their ideas relevant from medium to medium?
2. Despite not all of his ideas being embraced by the public, Jim Henson continued to work on the projects that were important to him and never changed his ideas to conform to others’ expectations. What can we learn from him about creating art that is important to us that isn’t necessarily mainstream?
3. What are some important tools for ensuring longevity in art?

From the Documentary:

1. What is the role of capitalism in art? In the film, Jim started by making commercials to finance his other creative projects and eventually had to buy back his own art. How might capitalism have limited everything he wanted to accomplish?
2. In the film, they say the idea of Sesame Street was to combine what kids needed to learn with what they liked to watch. How would you revamp that concept in your own education?
3. This film used archival footage from Jim Henson’s life. Do you think the documentary would have felt different if archival footage had not been used? Would it be harder or easier to connect with Jim since he was not present himself?



Activities

1. [Read 3 students describe their relationship to experimental cinema.](#) Create a [storyboard](#) for your own experimental film. A storyboard is a graphic layout that sequences illustrations and images with the purpose of visually telling a story.
 - o What visual medium(s) would you use to create the film? You may connect your film to your current classroom curriculum.
2. [Read about the history of puppetry from around the world.](#) Get into small groups and create a puppet character. What would your puppet look like? Where does your inspiration come from?
3. Write an essay from the perspective of one of Jim Henson's Muppet characters to explain why having the freedom to create art is important. How does freedom to create allow someone to connect to their imagination or go beyond the limitations of financial concerns?

Beyond the Classroom

1. [Watch this playlist of behind-the-scenes videos of Labyrinth courtesy of the Jim Henson Company.](#)
2. [How to cultivate creativity in the classroom](#)



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.

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.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895

The Lumiere brothers develop the first motion picture film reel, capturing brief unedited clips of life around them called 'actualities.'

1900-1920

Travelogue or 'scenic' films become popular showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

1926

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

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 war.

1960s

The 'cinema vérité' movement began in Europe, followed by the 'direct cinema' in the US. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968

The Argentine film, **La Hora de los Hornos**, opened the door to activist cinema of the 1970s, using film as a tool to counter capitalist politics in Latin America.

1988

Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s

The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium more affordable to independent filmmakers.

Present Day

The term 'documentary' comes 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.



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 language of the medium. 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. Many 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.

MEDIA LITERACY STANDARDS

MEDIUM

All Media Is Constructed.

- What is the message, how is it delivered and in what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements comprise the media content?
- 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?



Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources (connecting

insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole, 11-12th)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate

summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text (and makes clear the relationships among the key details

and ideas, 11-12th).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1-8C Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.2 Determine the central ideas or conclusions of a text; provide an accurate summary of the text

distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups,

and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own

clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the

reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or

argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.7 Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text,

video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.