

MVFF  
EDUCATION



# JESSZILLA

**CURRICULUM GUIDE**  
GRADES: 5-9

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Dear educators,

Thank you for attending the 47th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival's screening of *JessZilla*. We are excited to return in our 2024 fall season with a combination of both in-person screenings for local schools and online screenings for those of you joining us from afar

As media educators, we support film as the literature of the twenty-first century. This powerful medium sits in a critical part of human culture, at the intersection of art, industry, technology, and politics. It is a universal language that lets us tell stories about our collective hopes and fears and gives us the opportunity to make sense of the world around us and the people in it. This year, our film selections for school screenings continue to focus on increasingly relevant issues of global empathy and active citizenship, and we believe this film will be a powerful and engaging text to use in your classroom. These curricular materials are designed to get students to engage deeply with the film by the common-core aligned skills of developing an evidence-based interpretation of a text both orally and in writing.

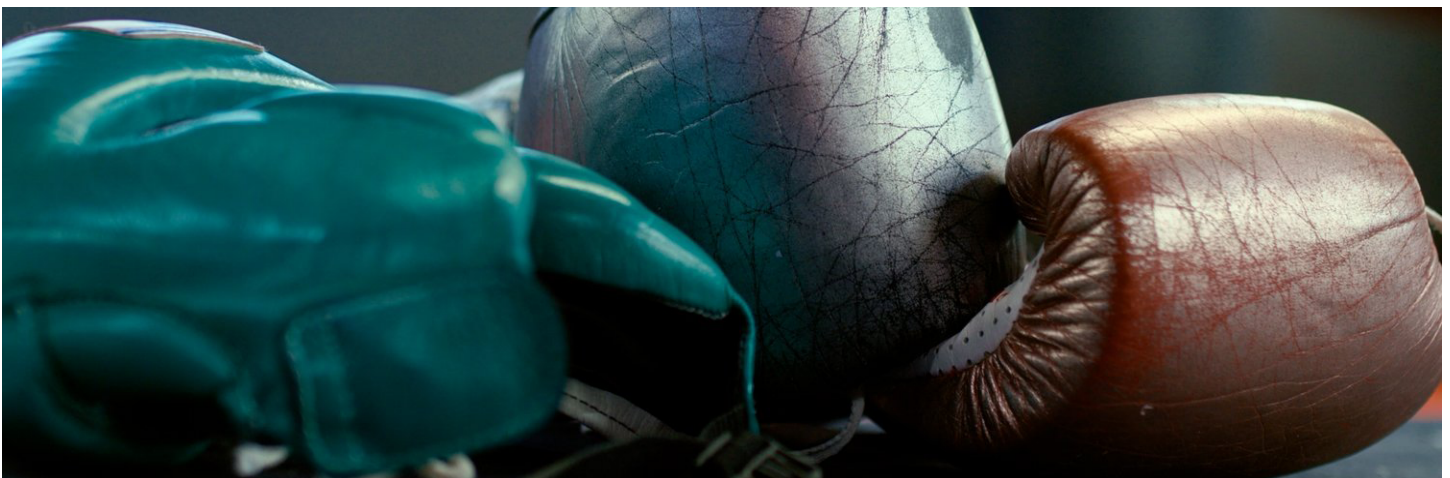
The discussion prompts have been crafted to offer students the opportunity to grapple with questions of ethics and social justice through representations of culture on film. They offer a variety of options for fostering small-group or whole-class dialogue by addressing the film industry in general and this film in particular. If your students are already familiar with a process of writing evidence-based interpretive essays, consider using the suggested essay prompts for a short writing piece, or consider the film review format as an alternative. Additionally, student handouts for a variety of thinking routines are provided for before, during, and after viewing the film with a particular emphasis on social-emotional learning. Extension activities offer further creative opportunities for students to consider the cultural impact of the film as both an art form and a political platform. We have also included a handout that provides some context for the film festival experience, which may help to introduce your screening experience.

Thank you so much for your tireless work! Enjoy the film!

Sincerely,  
The CAFilm Education Team

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the central issue addressed in this documentary? What new insight did you gain from the beginning to the end of the film?
2. What are some surprising facts you learned from this film? How do these facts shape your understanding of the central issue of the film?
3. Does this documentary feel objective and balanced in its presentation of the issues? Why or why not?
4. Describe a moment or a scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about the scene that was especially compelling for you?
5. What did you learn from this film you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
6. If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?
7. Were there any perspectives relevant to the central issues of the documentary that were not included? How would those voices have changed the film?
8. What does it mean to be a champion? How does the sport of boxing become a metaphor for life?
9. How does boxing give Jesselyn a platform to serve her family and community?
10. What impact does Jesselyn's story have on the world, and not just the world of boxing or the world of sports?
11. How does the story of feminism, bravery, and passion in a male-dominated sport engage, impact, and inspire viewers from beginning to end?
12. What is the significance of the film's title, *JessZilla*? How does it relate to the film's themes and the film's message?



# DISCUSSION NOTECATCHER

**Directions:**

Use this notecatcher to record what you take away from discussing the questions above.

## IDEAS I HEARD DURING DISCUSSION

## MIND-POP IDEAS

Ideas that came to my mind during discussion.

## ONE IMPORTANT THING I LEARNED DURING DISCUSSION

# INTERPRETIVE ESSAY PROMPTS

1. JessZilla shows that the greatest and most precious things in life, like family and integrity, are more important than winning and success. Write an essay in which you show how a personal story of a young girl's attitude, nature, and approach to life is impactful and inspirational for all viewers.
2. JessZilla is a story of feminism, bravery, and passion in a male-dominated sport. Write an essay in which you show how the film is a story of what it means to be a champion, in the boxing ring, and also in life.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### NBC Today

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcKsBcw5xUY>

NY Segment on Jesselyn Silva's Passing: Remembering the life of young New Jersey Boxing Prodigy

### JessZilla | Entertainment

[https://www.nuvo.net/entertainment/jesszilla/article\\_b0ab7482-630e-11ee-9ee7-d3680142b2a0.html](https://www.nuvo.net/entertainment/jesszilla/article_b0ab7482-630e-11ee-9ee7-d3680142b2a0.html)

What do we each personally bring to viewing a documentary, its making motivated by someone who wants to know why someone is doing something that seems out of the ordinary?

### TFK Reads: My Corner of the Ring

<https://www.timeforkids.com/g56/tfk-reads-my-corner-ring/>

My Corner of the Ring is one of TFK's 10 recommended reads this summer. Here, a team of TFK Kid Reporters give their take.

### Project Muse: Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/732017>

My Corner of the Ring: A Memoir from a Champ by Jesselyn Silva (review)

### The Art of the Interview

<https://editmentor.com/blog/the-art-of-the-interview-crafting-compelling-documentaries/>

Understanding the importance of interviews in documentaries.

## ABOUT CAFILM

The nonprofit California Film Institute celebrates and promotes film as art and education through year-round programming at the independent Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, presentation of the acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival and DocLands Documentary Film Festival, as well as cultivation of the next generation of filmmakers and audiences through CAFILM Education programs.

### Follow the California Film Institute on social media



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# STANDARDS

## Common Core State Standards ELA-Literacy

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.2

Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3

Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.5

Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text, including how the major sections contribute to the whole and to the development of the ideas.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1

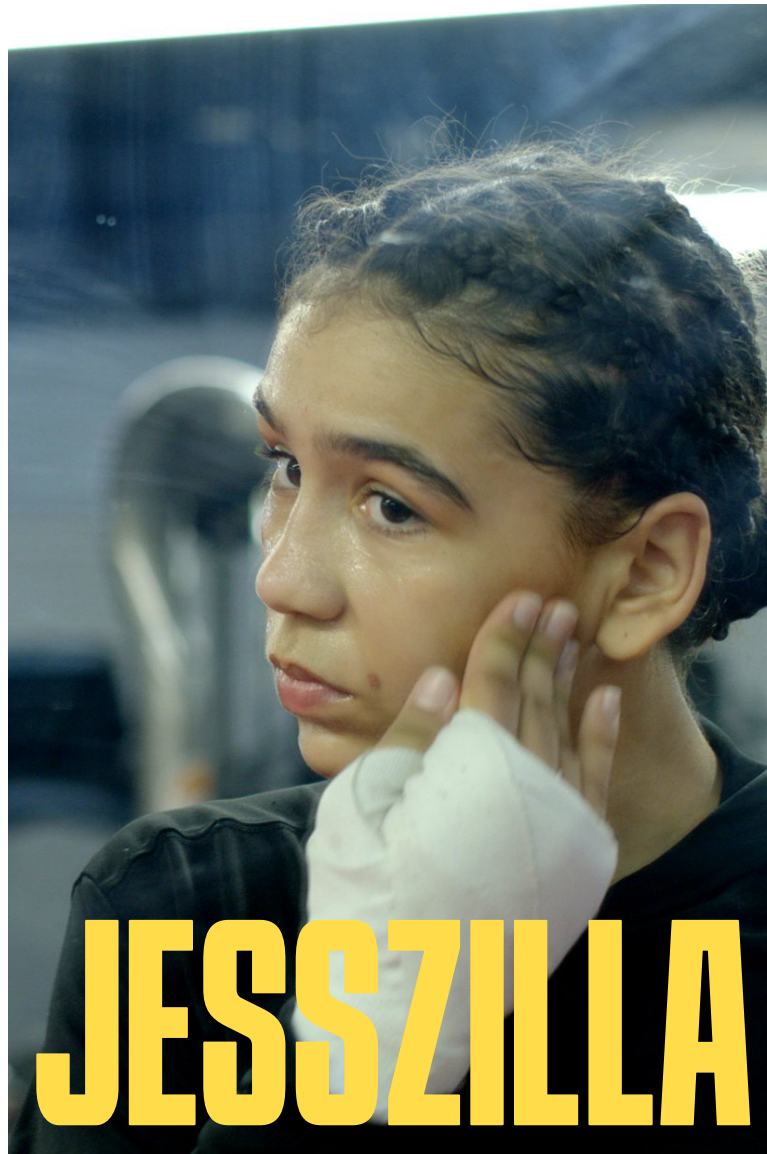
Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_



## ABOUT THE FILM

Jesselyn Silva (self-named “JessZilla”) is a 16 year old with a mischievous megawatt smile and undeniably one of the world’s best dads, Pedro. Academically gifted and athletically oriented, she became hooked on boxing as a tot after making herself a fixture in her dad’s gym—not as a spectator, but as a passionate participant in the sport. From Jess’s first fights in the ring at age seven, director Emily Sheskin has followed the pint-sized pugilist on her journey toward winning the gold belt as a three-time national champion, with further triumphs on her way, ready to compete in the Junior Olympics. But Jesselyn’s challenges don’t stop there: As she enters her teenage years, the first opponent she’s totally unprepared for enters her life and her greatest fight begins. *JessZilla* is an inspiring story of endurance, faith, and the love between a father and an extraordinary daughter: A knockout!

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

### ERICA SHESKIN

Emily Sheskin is an award winning film and commercial director. Her work has been featured in numerous publications such as (but not limited to) The New York Times, National Geographic, and The Atlantic. As a commercial director for over 10 years, Emily has directed for many well-known clients such as Microsoft and Disney. She's created short documentary content for Netflix, and brings a commercial level of polish to all her short film work, such as *Girl Boxer* which premiered as a New York Times OpDoc in 2017.

Her first feature film, *JessZilla*, premiered in 2023 at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival where it was in competition. From there, the film has won awards at the Fargo Film Festival, Rhode Island Film Festival, Ridgefield Film Festival, and the Atlanta Film Festival. She is currently working with Versus NY to find a home for it as it continues to be programmed in festivals such as IDFA, DOC NYC, and more.



## FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

When I initially read about Jesselyn Silva, known as “JessZilla,” the ambitious young boxer featured in this film, I loved the idea of profiling a young girl’s journey in a male-dominated combat sport. It’s no secret that women’s boxing has nowhere near the participants — or the money, or the audience — that men’s boxing has. Broadcasters of the sport generally feature men; the Amateur International Boxing Association has gone so far as to encourage women to box in skirts.

But beyond considering the challenges that Jesselyn will face navigating her way through a sport where her presence will generally be an anomaly, I was captivated by the dynamic between her and her father, Pedro. As a filmmaker, I often see profiles of high achieving kids in sports that leave me wondering where their parents fit in all this. When I met them, I immediately understood that Pedro is not the kind of dad who is pushing his daughter to do something she isn’t interested in and, instead, is following his daughter’s lead, supporting her as best he can. Given that this is a film about boxing, I felt it was essential to create a nuanced portrait of their family and to ward off superficial criticisms like, “How could a man let his cute little girl do such a violent sport?”

It was clear to me that Jesselyn’s drive was fueled by the love and support of her father. It was also obvious that Pedro is a huge part of Jesselyn’s story, but in no way resembles those hovering “helicopter parents” we hear so much about today. I hope the end result is a work that is as much about girls breaking athletic barriers as parents fostering drive in their children – encouraging them to do what they love, and to do their best.



# BEFORE VIEWING

## JOURNAL PROMPT

**Directions:**

The film you are about to watch follows Jesselyn Silva, a three-times national boxing champion with her sights set on being the best in the sport. As Jesselyn is on the cusp of making the Olympic team, an unthinkable diagnosis redefines what it means to fight.

Consider the following three questions and record your responses in the chart below.

<p><b>Why</b> might this topic matter to me?</p>	
<p><b>Why</b> might this topic matter to people around me: family, friends, community?</p>	
<p><b>Why</b> might this topic matter to the world?</p>	



# DURING VIEWING

## EMPATHY MAP

### How to Use this Thinking Routine:

In *JessZilla*, we follow the story of Jesselyn Silva, a three-times national boxing champion with her sights set on the best in the sport. In this empathy map activity, fill out each quadrant to better understand and connect with her lived experience.

### HEAR

Much of the film includes interviews with Jesselyn and her father, Pedro. What does the viewer hear from Jesselyn herself, and her father, about the challenges she is facing as a young female boxer?

### SEE

What does Jesselyn's boxing experience look like? What challenges does she face at the gym, in the ring, and at various competitions?

### FEEL

How does Jesselyn feel about being a boxer? How does she feel about the challenges of the sport specific to young female boxers?

### SAY/DO

Is there any difference between what Jesselyn says and what she does? Are her actions aligned with her words?

A Thinking Routine Borrowed from Harvard Project Zero's Think Routine Toolbox:  
<https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>

# DURING VIEWING

## ELEMENTS OF DOCUMENTARY NOTECATCHER

**Directions:**

The elements of documentary are the different types of sound and image used to explore the subject of the film. There are six basic elements that can be found in all documentaries, though a film might not use all of them. While viewing, use the chart below to record impactful moments and scenes from the film in the appropriate box based on what element of documentary filmmaking is used. Then, after viewing, briefly analyze which of the elements were used most effectively in this film.

<p><b>Narration</b> Narration is the spoken word heard throughout a film. Sometimes the narrator is a person in the film, and sometimes it is a disconnected observer.</p>	<p><b>Actuality Footage</b> Actuality footage refers to the unscripted footage recorded in the making of the documentary.</p>	<p><b>Archival Materials</b> Archival materials are the pieces of film, video, photographs, documents, and sound recordings that were created for other uses prior to the documentary.</p>
<p><b>On-Screen Text</b> Text is often used throughout a documentary to provide important facts, identify people, and present additional information.</p>	<p><b>Interviews</b> Interviews are the recorded conversations with a person who has some connection to or knowledge about the subject of the film.</p>	<p><b>Animations/Reenactments</b> Documentaries will sometimes use animation or staged recreations of situations and events in order to tell a story.</p>

Which of the elements of documentary filmmaking were used most effectively in this film?

Explain Your Reasoning.

# AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

**Directions:**

When watching documentary films, you can ask yourself questions about content, your experience as a viewer, and the film's presentation. Recall, reflect, and then respond to each question, referring to specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your response.

1. According to the interviews, if she were going to make this movie, how does Jesselyn want her story to begin? How does she want it to end? How does it begin and how does it end?

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2. How did Jesselyn get her start in boxing?

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3. What sets Jesselyn apart as a young female boxer in a male-dominated sport?

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4. How does her father feel about watching Jesselyn spar, train, fight, and compete? What conflicts him about his daughter's passion for a male-dominated sport?

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## AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

5. What does Jesselyn hope to accomplish with boxing? What goals has she set for herself in the sport? What does she hope others will learn from her involvement and dedication to becoming a champion in the ring?

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6. What happens that changes the plans Jesselyn has for her life in boxing? What new and unplanned opponent does she have to learn how to fight outside of the ring?

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7. How does Jesselyn become another kind of champion in her corner of the ring?

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8. What do Jesselyn and her father hope to accomplish with this film?

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# AFTER VIEWING

## SAME, DIFFERENT, CONNECT, ENGAGE

### How to Use this Thinking Routine:

Same, different, connect, engage is a thinking routine to nurture empathetic perspective taking and cultural bridge building. After watching Jesszilla, think about your relationship to the main character by responding to each of the prompts in the following boxes.

### SAME

In what ways are you similar to Jesselyn?

### DIFFERENT

In what ways are you different from Jesselyn?

### CONNECT

In what ways are you connected to Jesselyn as a human being?

### ENGAGE

What would you like to ask, say, or do with Jesselyn if you had the chance?

A Thinking Routine Borrowed from Harvard Project Zero's Think Routine Toolbox:

<https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>

# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## THE ART OF THE INTERVIEW

### Directions:

At the heart of every great documentary are the interviews with subjects who have lived through or have expertise on the topic being explored. These interviews serve as the backbone of the storytelling, providing firsthand accounts, personal insights, and emotional connections that draw viewers into the narrative. JessZilla integrates authentic and compelling moments from interviews with Jesselyn and her father Pedro that truly impact the audience.

There are different types of interview activities that can be used to practice and master the art of the interview. Check out the different types of interviews and implement one in the classroom in order to delve deep into real-life subjects and present them in a powerful and engaging manner.

### One-on-one Interviews

One-on-one interviews provide students with the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations and develop interpersonal skills.

1. **Peer Interviews:** Pairing students together to interview each other allows them to practice active listening, empathy, and effective questions. This activity encourages students to learn from one another and build connections within their peer group.
2. **Teacher-Student Interviews:** In this activity, students interview their teachers on a topic of interest. This not only helps students develop communication skills but also fosters positive relationships between students and teachers.

### Group Interviews

Group interviews provide a collaborative and interactive environment for students to learn from one another.

1. **Panel Interviews:** Students form a panel and take turns being interviewed by their peers. This activity promotes active listening, critical thinking, and the ability to respond to different perspectives.
2. **Role-play Interviews:** Students are assigned specific roles and engage in mock interviews. This activity allows students to step into different perspectives, enhancing their empathy and understanding of different viewpoints.

### Fun and Engaging Interview Activity Ideas

#### “Meet the Expert” Interview

In this activity, students have the opportunity to interview professionals in an area of personal interest for a desired future career field. This not only exposes them to different career paths, but also allows them to gain valuable insights and advice. Students can reach out to professionals in their community, or conduct virtual interviews with experts from around the world.

#### “Time Traveler” Interview

Transporting students to different time periods, this activity involves interviewing historical figures or fictional characters. Students can research and prepare questions to ask these individuals, promoting creativity, critical thinking, and historical understanding.

#### “Talk Show” Interview

In this activity, students take on the roles of talk show host and guest. They can choose a topic of interest and conduct an interview-style discussion. This activity fosters public speaking skills, teamwork, and the ability to engage in meaningful conversations.



# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## VIDEO LITERACY: CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

### Directions:

Interviewing is one of the most important skill sets for a documentary filmmaker. Conducting an interview is really composed of two skills: the technical aspects of camera placement and sound recording, and the interpersonal skills of conducting the interview. Read on for some strategies for ensuring your interview subject feels comfortable and your conversation elicits the information relevant to the story you want to tell.

### BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- Research your topic. You want to understand your topic and how your subject relates to and supports your topic.
- Contact your interview subject and introduce yourself, the story you want to tell, and a general overview of the topic of the interview.
- Tell your subject not to prepare answers and to instead come ready to just have a conversation.
- Draft some potential questions to ask, but be prepared to go off script as the conversation requires.



# **EXTENSION ACTIVITY**

## **VIDEO LITERACY: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Directions:**

Plan a list of questions for your interview subject on a topic of your choice.

### **INTERVIEW SUBJECT FAST FACTS**

**Name:**

**Occupation:**

**Relevance to Story | Film Topic:**

**Essential Question:**

**Follow Up Prompts:**

1.

2.

3.

# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## VIDEO LITERACY: RECORD THE INTERVIEW

### Directions:

Once the preparation is complete, it's time to conduct the interview itself. This stage involves creating a comfortable and authentic environment for the interviewee and employing techniques to elicit genuine responses.

### INTERVIEW SUBJECT FAST FACTS

#### SETTING UP

- Make your subject feel comfortable by being respectful of their space and having light conversation to break the ice.
- If your subject starts talking about the main subject before the cameras are ready, say something like "I'm looking forward to hearing about this when we start filming" so you can get the full story on camera.
- Reassure the subject that you will edit the interview, so anything that doesn't work won't get used and they can repeat a line if necessary.
- Gently instruct them on where they should be looking. This is dependent on the interview framing style you use, and is likely a choice of either looking into the camera, or, more likely, making eye contact with you, the interviewer.

#### DURING THE INTERVIEW

- Be present. Make eye contact with your subject, and avoid staring at your notes. React authentically, and encourage your subject through body language, such as nodding your head or smiling when appropriate.
- If the subject brings a prepared statement they'd like to read, record it as a voice-over before the interview. This gets it out of the way, and then you can get them to talk about what is important in a more conversational way.
- Take notes. Even though you are recording, notes are helpful so you can refer back and ask for more details during the interview.
- Don't worry about what doesn't work. Listen for what does work, and make sure you get your subject to speak about the key points that are important to you. If you haven't heard what you
- need, prompt for it.
- At the end of the interview, ask both your subject and film crew if there's anything they'd like to talk about that hasn't been covered so far. They might have some ideas you didn't think of during the interview.
- Thank your subject for participating in the project.

#### HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS

- Focus on your subject's unique experiences and knowledge.
- Always focus on getting the basic questions of who, what, when, where, why and how.
- Avoid questions with yes or no answers.
- Ask questions that evoke the subject's passion and enthusiasm for the topic. Guide the conversation, but don't interrupt or speak over your subject.
- Listen for passionate points during the interview and ask additional probing questions to get your subject to go deeper into these points.

# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## FILM REVIEW

### Directions:

After watching the narrative feature *JessZilla*, write a review of the film.

While a film review is an evaluation of a movie, it is not simply a viewer-response expressing the writer's feelings about the film. Instead, a film review attempts to do three things for the reader:

1. **Summarize** what the film is about (the story)
2. **Interpret** the film/filmmakers' intended meaning (the themes and claims)
3. **Evaluate** whether the film is successful in expressing the intended meaning (its effectiveness in conveying the themes and claims)

A review will support its perspective with evidence from the film, such as descriptions of important moments, characters, and scenes.

## Suggested Structure

### Introduction

- Introduce the film: title, director, and any relevant credentials (award wins for the film, other films by the director, origins for the film's story, etc.).
- Summarize what the film is about - briefly, and without any "spoilers" that give away plot twists and surprises.

### Body

- Offer an interpretation of what the film/director is trying to say through this story. In other words, what is the film's theme, message, or primary claim?

### Conclusion

- Evaluate whether the film is successful or not in conveying its intended message.
- Identify who the intended audience is and how effective the film is in meeting their needs. Is the film for a particular age group or social group?

Final Tip: Make sure to include some critical appraisal of the film in the first and last sentence, but try to weave it throughout the review as well.



From CAFILM Education Resources: Narrative Film Analysis Toolkit  
<https://www.cafilmedu.org/curriculum-resources/>



# ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS



An opening night screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

©Tommy Lau

## What is a film festival?

A film festival is an event in which multiple movies are presented over the course of one or several days. Depending on the size of the festival, all of the screenings may take place in a single theater or may involve multiple venues throughout a city. Festivals also include special events like panel discussions with filmmakers and actors. Typically, filmmakers submit their works to a festival, where a team of curators selects the best entries for inclusion in the festival. For independent and international filmmakers, festivals are often an important way to raise awareness of a film, generate an audience, and/or attract a studio to purchase the rights to distribute a film in a wider release. Acceptance into a major festival can add significant prestige to a film, with some festival awards (such as the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or) considered among the highest honors a film can receive.

There are many film festivals through-

out the world, with some focusing on particular themes, such as highlighting LGBTQ films/filmmakers, specific cultural groups, or particular genres. While some of the more famous festivals may be in distant locations, there are hundreds of small festivals spread through every corner of the world and, increasingly, festivals are using streaming access to make it easier for the public to view their curated programs.

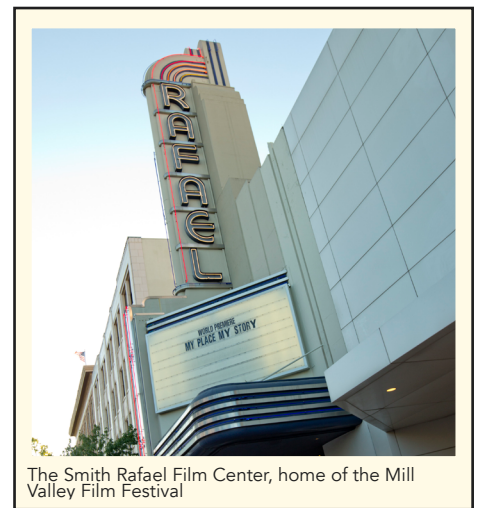
## History of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Since founding the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1977, Executive Director Mark Fishkin has shepherded this once small, three-day showcase into an eleven-day, internationally acclaimed cinema event presenting a wide variety of new films from around the world in an engaged, community setting.

The festival has an impressive track record of launching new films and new filmmakers, and has earned a reputation as a filmmakers' festival

by celebrating the best in American independent and foreign films, alongside high-profile and prestigious award contenders. The relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere surrounding MVFF, gives filmmakers and audiences alike the opportunity to share their work and experiences in a collaborative and convivial setting.

Each year the festival welcomes more than 200 filmmakers, representing more than 50 countries. Screening sections include world cinema, US cinema, documentaries, family films, and shorts programs. Annual festival initiatives include Active Cinema, a forum for films that aim to engage audiences and transform ideas into action; Mind the Gap, a platform for inclusion and equity; and ¡Viva el Cine!, a showcase of Latin American and Spanish-language films. Festival guests also enjoy an exciting selection of Tributes, Spotlights and Galas throughout the program.



The Smith Rafael Film Center, home of the Mill Valley Film Festival

## Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of a film festival? What are the benefits for filmmakers? For the audience? For the community?
2. How might the films at a festival differ from the films available to watch at your local movie theater?
3. What qualities do you think festival curators might look for in a film? If you are watching a festival film with a class/school group, what aspects of the film do you think made it appealing to the curators?

## Get Involved!

Many film festivals, including the Mill Valley Film Festival, have student film categories. If you are a filmmaker, explore FilmFreeway ([www.filmfreeway.com](http://www.filmfreeway.com)) for a database of worldwide film festivals where you can submit your film. The call for entries for MVFF opens in late February and closes in June. Youth filmmakers do not have to pay an entry fee. MVFF also offers many opportunities for volunteering. Find out more at <https://www.cafilm.org/volunteer/>.