

Class in the Media: Writing a Television Show  
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Suggested Grade Levels: 10th - 12th grades

Suggested Subject Area: Social Studies

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will examine messages about class and class-linked behavior in popular media presentations.
2. Students will use primary source material to make observations.
3. Students will use note-taking, journal-keeping, and writing skills to create a television show synopsis.
4. Students will practice thinking skills of analysis and synthesis.

Standards List:

This activity addresses the following national content standards as outlined in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS):

Topic: Social Groupings: Function and Influence on Behavior: (c)  
Describe the ways family, religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status and other group and cultural influences contribute to the development of a sense of self.

It also addresses the following national content standards as outlined by McREL, accessible at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

Language Arts. Standard: 1. Level IV: High School (Grades 9-12).  
Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts. Standard: 2. Level IV: High School (Grades 9-12).  
Demonstrates competence in the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Theatre. Standard: 1. Level IV: High School (Grades 9-12). Demonstrates competence in writing scripts. CNAEA: National Standards for Arts Education, p. 30 (Explicitly stated).

Theatre. Standard: 5. Level IV: High School (Grades 9-12). Understands how informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions create and communicate meaning.

United States History. Standard: 31. Level IV: High School (Grades 9-12).  
Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the

contemporary United States. NCHS: Basic Edition, p. 129 (Explicitly stated). > Understands the influence of social change and the entertainment industry in shaping views on art, gender, and culture.

#### Tools and Materials:

1. Access to television sets and the internet.
2. Writing materials and journals.
3. An appropriate musical selection for the opening session.
4. Access to video recorders would be helpful.

#### Time Needed:

On a conventional schedule, four 45-minute class periods should be allotted to the lesson. Schools on a block schedule should allot three periods to the lesson.

#### Strategy:

1. Play a couple songs such as the following: Bruce Springsteen's "Youngstown," John Mellencamp's "Little Pink Houses," Loretta Lynn's "Coal Miner's Daughter," Toby Keith's "Country Comes to Town," Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl," Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car," Puff Daddy's "It's All About the Benjamins" (radio version, with bleeps!) or West Side Story's "America." Ask students to think about what the songs have in common. How do they touch on social class issues? Note that social class issues often crop up in songs and on television and in the entertainment and news media generally. To encourage brainstorming, ask the students to define "the media," noting the difference between entertainment and news media. Tell the students that they are going to explore how the media shape society's views on social class. You might also ask students to prepare their own definitions of social class and to compare their definitions with the dictionary's.

2. Direct students to the Class in America web site at <http://www.pbs.org/classinamerica>. They should click on "Essays" and then read "Pride, prejudice and the not-so-subtle politics of the working class." Ask the students to think about characters who wear uniforms in television shows. Have them name some of the characters and list the names on the chalk board. Next, ask the students about what social class each character might be in and why. Do the students notice any trends? Are all the characters working class? Do the working class characters have any personality traits in common? What about the middle class characters? Ask them to name some elite characters from television shows. What traits do they have in common? You might encourage the students to think about accents, clothing, lifestyle, etc.

3. As homework, students should identify two or three current popular television shows such as "Dawson's Creek" or "Friends" and examine the class content of these shows. It might be useful for the students to watch an episode of "Married

with Children," "The Simpsons," "The Bill Cosby Show," or another show which offers a view of class other than that portrayed in the more popular teen-oriented programs. Ask students to look for class identifiers such as clothing, hobbies, house, accents, jobs, and education. Have the students develop a list of class identifiers. You might ask them to prepare a chart listing four characters and the class identifiers for each or ask them to keep a journal detailing their observations. These will be useful later in the group discussion about stereotypes. Time and equipment permitting, students might prepare a video with clips of the shows demonstrating the class identifiers. Students might also try to track the percentage of shows that deal with different classes. For example, looking at prime-time schedules of three networks, they could map out how many shows are set in upper class settings, how many in lower class settings, etc.

4. Students should share their observations with the class. The discussion should touch on the concept of stereotyping. Ask students, What is a stereotype? How might the class identifiers you noticed be stereotypical? What other class-based stereotypes did you notice in these shows? Are these stereotypes accurate? Are they dangerous?

5. Next, ask the students to prepare synopses of proposed situation comedies or dramas that would accurately represent the class make-up of their school. What would such shows look like? Students should share their proposals with the class. You might want the class to determine which of the synopses most accurately reflects the make-up of their school and why. To do this, you might encourage them to work with the school's administration or guidance department to get statistical information about the school's ethnic and class composition. Students could use this information to measure reality against what they think is true about their school and to discuss the comparison.

6. At the end of the lesson, students should return to their journals to reflect on any changes in their definitions and/or perceptions about how the media shape our views of social class.

#### Assessment Recommendation:

1. Student journals and synopses can be evaluated on completeness, depth of thought, and appropriate use of examples.

2. Student participation in class discussions can be assessed by the teacher.

#### Extensions:

1. Using the criteria developed in activities 3 and 4 (above) students could examine recent movies for class content. Some suggestions would be "Titanic," "The Talented Mr. Ripley," "The Green Mile," which deals with issues of race, poverty,

and crime, and "Mansfield Park," which illustrates Jane Austen's take on class issues in 19th century England.

2. Students could compare the class-related content of a couple of their local newspapers. Ask them to note how many articles deal with working-class issues. How many articles deal with news items that the wealthy might be interested in? How large is the business section compared to the rest of the paper? How much of the business section is devoted to working-class issues? What do these things say about the paper's target audience? Are different papers targeting readers in different social classes?

3. Students might be interested in visiting the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) web site at <http://www.fair.org> to learn about some of the challenges the news media face today.