

Audio-Visual Primary Sources

Course

Making Observations [6:31]

https://players.brightcove.net/2566261579001/HyuWsfFhb_default/index.html?videoId=5656538155001

About

Recording observations is a key step in analyzing primary sources. Working with film poses special challenges.

Transcript

Using the written word isn't the only way to capture an observation for a film. When students analyze film primary sources that are short and have strong visual elements, I may give them the option of sketching scenes as observations. This is a good observation analysis option when students are watching the film as a class on one screen. I can play the film through two, three, or even four times, depending on its length, and students choose moments they want to document. I usually give them a sheet with three or four rectangular boxes, each with a few vertical lines next to them, if they want to add a short written description or include dialogue or a time stamp from the film.

This is a very low-tech way to focus on visual elements. I noticed that students usually lack strong detail when making observations in this way, possibly because the analysis and the film go too quickly for them to focus on fine details. But I think that's all right. This method encourages them to focus on larger aspects that they value in the film and can work well for certain types of primary source film. Students can do this work individually or in pairs, having a quick discussion to decide what each student will document in sketches and short description.

A slightly more high-tech way to make these visual observations when students are in a one-to-one situation or very small group or pairs is for students to watch the film on separate devices, taking screenshots during moments of the film they want to make observations of. Students can drop those screenshots into a template or create their own observation document. Like the lines in the last example, a text box where students can add written observation, dialogue, or timestamps will give them an opportunity to make more detailed observations. They can also use the text box to document reflections or questions that are directly connected to the moment captured in the screenshot. This method of making visual observation still encourages students to focus in on moments they value but allows them to, in the writing that accompanies that piece, reference details that can be seen in the screenshot. It also allows other students or you, the educator who view the analysis, to more easily identify the moment being captured by the student.

Looking back at our film, students may sketch or take a screenshot of the trolley, another sketch of the crowd, and possibly another of the bridled horse. Notice that while we capture visual details of the moment, some of the same details that we may have seen in our previous example, where students were only using text, we lose some of the flow from moment-to-moment, the connectedness that students may be able to show in a narrative observation.

We've had two variations of primary source film analysis that focus on students' descriptions and two that focus on moments, but we haven't analyzed a primary source film in a way that focuses on the movement within the film. Certainly, students can write about the movement or draw arrows in their illustrations, but to capture and observe the moment, there are two additional methods of observation analysis that students can attempt.

The first works well in a one-to-one environment. Similar to our student sketching in our earlier example, this time, they sketch with motion in mind. To do this, they'll want to make a more precise drawing. I typically have my students set the primary source film to show full screen on a tablet. Then, I have them lay their tablet down on a table, their screen brightness set at its highest. With a piece of paper set over the screen, students identify the motion they want to observe, set it at a starting point and do a rough sketch on the paper, using the image that shows through as their guide. Then, they advance the film and sketch the same element in its new position, drawing an arrow to show movement from one position to another. If the movement is small, students may capture just the first and last image with a sketch and include shorter arrows to show the movement that will happen or did happen.

After students sketch they can take the paper off the screen and add text if they would like to add additional details or want to record reflections or questions related to the movement. This method would work well with our street scene film when trying to capture the movement of the crowd to show that it's not moving in unison but in many different directions. A student could choose two, three, or four individuals, drawing a rough sketch after the trolley moves to the right of the screen. And then a second and third sketch of the same people spaced out evenly over the film.

Arrows would show the individual's movement while a rough sketch of the lines of the building and trolley can give a sense of the non-moving elements in that portion of the film. To fully comment on the movement, as well as any aspects of the film, a final way to approach a film primary source is for students to make observations, reflections, and questions onto the film itself. To be able to do this, students will need to have downloaded a copy of the film or have access to an online film editor. The features of many film editors lend themselves to students performing a primary source analysis. Adding layered text and different colors to distinguish between observations, reflections, and questions is one way students can record their ideas directly onto the film.

But in silent films, students may also consider adding audio narration directly over the film. Both allow student analysis to be seen or heard in real time, directly with the film itself. If the motion moves too quickly, other video editing features can be used. Students may freeze a frame or take a screenshot of a frame and insert it, allowing the student to extend the moment, point out, reflect on, or question a visual element, or prepare the viewer to see a certain area of the film or motion that they are analyzing.

Other editing software features may allow the user to slow down or loop a portion of the film, giving the student an opportunity to focus on movement and incorporate different layers of analysis in real time over the film. The use of video editing software not only helps a student fully realize their ability to analyze a film primary source and focus on moments, story, and movement by making annotations in real time, it also helps the student communicate the analysis to others. Allowing a teacher or student to view a primary source analysis in real time as the film unfolds.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Primary Source Audio Visual Resources](#)

[Primary Sources Used in This Workshop](#)

[Teaching with AV Sources.](#)

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