

## **The First Amendment Through Film and Television: Syllabus<sup>1</sup>**

Over the next 13 weeks, students in this class will learn about the basics of the First Amendment, what it stands for, how we as a nation and society have been affected by it, and how it shapes our various belief systems as citizens. The focus on expository writing for print and speech is a good match for a course about free expression and the rights of people to free thought and the sharing of ideas. At the end of this course, students will write an informative, creative, well-reasoned, well-researched, organic, and organized thesis paper about how they believe the First Amendment has been valued and abused throughout the history of the United States. They will also complete visual presentations based on the films shown and discussed, where students will talk about how the First Amendment is represented and how it was used and abused if it applies to the movies and television episodes studied, and why they believe the films being discussed are important.

### Course Objectives:

- To understand through film and other visual media the impact the First Amendment has on people's lives and right to express ideas, and how it affects what we can and can't do.
- To understand how the First Amendment can also be abused through examples from films, television episodes, and court cases.
- To look at court cases where the First Amendment has been called into question and where the people who supported it came out on top.
- To build student analysis expository writing skills by crafting a variety of writing assignments including personal journals, discussions, speeches, news reports and opinion papers – including peer reviews.

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***Week 1: Introduction to Class and to the First Amendment***

*Materials:* Video: First Amendment | Constitution 101 [First Amendment | Constitution 101 \(youtube.com\)](#)

*Cahoot quiz:* The First Amendment

*Creative Product:* Group Discussion Post about Introducing Yourself to the Class and What You Believe the First Amendment means (building the writing skill of summarizing your experiences and writing a supported opinion)

***Week 2: The Power of the Everyman***

*Materials:* Film: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (Columbia Pictures, 1939, 130 min.)

FDR's Four Freedoms Speech (1941): [President Franklin Roosevelt's Annual Message \(Four Freedoms\) to Congress \(1941\) | National Archives](#)

*Creative Product:* Group Discussion Post (focusing on the power of every person to change the system, building on the writing skill of composing inspirational content)

Journal entry about an alternate happy ending for Smith, post and reply to others (building on creative thought and writing believable dialogue)

***Week 3: Introduction to courts system***

*Materials:* [Remembering Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, dead at 87 \(youtube.com\)](#)

Ruth Bader Ginsberg, On the Basis of Sex (Focus Features, 2018)

Marshall (Open Road Films, 2017)

[U.S. Attorneys | Introduction To The Federal Court System | United States Department of Justice](#)

PowerPoint: How to Read a Case Michele G Miles, Esquire

Audio lecture: The appellate process isn't what you think, John H Pelzer, Esquire

[NB: Miles and Pelzer are the author's parents, both attorneys, lecturers and published authors.

While this writer did not have an interest in studying law (beyond media law as applicable to films) the discussions about law, legal news and civics were daily events deserving of sharing. It was the "raised by wolves" learning system and built a lifelong interest in social justice topics.]

*Creative Product:* Choose from a list of cases and track them (classroom reading predicting the outcome of the case – building the research skills for later writing assignments)<sup>2</sup>

Cases include: *Brandenberg vs. Ohio*; *Wisconsin vs. Yoder*; *Abel vs. United States*; *Mapp vs. Ohio*; *Texas vs. Johnson*; *Gideon vs. Wainwright*; *Brown vs. Board of Education*

Watch one of the following films for extra credit this week, to produce a short essay on the impact the case had on U.S. law or World law:

- *Ruby Bridges* (ABC, 1998)
- *Loving* (Focus Features, 2016)
- *Amistad* (DreamWorks, 1997)
- *Judgment at Nuremberg* (United Artists, 1961)

Assignment builds the writing skill of summarizing facts while keeping essential meanings.

#### ***Week 4-5: Freedom of speech***

Video to introduce topic: [Blame Canada - South Park: Bigger Longer & Uncut \(3/9\) Movie CLIP \(1999\) HD - YouTube](#)

Materials: Instructor lecture "Why Freedom of Speech is so important"

Films/TV episodes to watch:

- *Inherit the Wind* (United Artists, 1960)

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<sup>2</sup> The continual development of cases as the Supreme Court considers First Amendment issues will require the faculty to update this case list and have a conversant knowledge of cases in the news.

- Trumbo (Bleeker Street, 2015)
- George Carlin's American Dream (HBO, 2022)
- 1984 (Virgin Films, 1984) or Fahrenheit 451 (Universal Pictures, 1966)
- Shouting Fire (Moxie Firecracker Films, 2009)
- The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (Season 1 Episodes 1-3) (Amazon Prime, 2017)

Discussions (Pick One):

1. Are there some thoughts which should not be allowed? Who decides what those thoughts are? If society decides to censor some speech, where do those thoughts go? Should what is acceptable be defined differently in various parts of the country?
2. Book banning has become a hot topic in some states. Should parent groups, schools, or governments decide which books should or should not be banned? Does this banning stop at schools or if a book is banned in schools, should it be removed from public libraries? Bookstores? Personal libraries?

The writing assignment focuses on defending a position and recognizing possible opposite positions – sometimes there is no one right answer.

### ***Week 6: Freedom of religion Part 1***

Lecture: Is freedom of religion still free?

Viewing Materials:

- First Freedom: The Fight for Religious Liberty (PBS, 2012, available on Amazon Prime)
- Friendly Persuasion (MGM, 1956)
- Shibboleth (The West Wing Season 2 Episode 8) (NBC)
- The Crucible (Twentieth Century Fox, 1996)

Creative Product: What is the price to be paid for separation between church and state? Pick one group from any of the viewing materials and say the price that group of people paid for their beliefs, and in your opinion, was it worth it? When done, trade yours with another student and have them critique it to determine if the student supported and explained their position. [Peer review is an essential part of building writing skills; it presents the student with different writing styles and prepares the student for revisions to their own work.]

***Week 7: Freedom of religion Part 2: Cults***

Opening Video: Origin of Everything: Why Are We Obsessed with Cults? (Season 2, Episode 17) (PBS.org)

Additional Viewing Materials:

- The Joy of Sect (The Simpsons Season 9 Episode 13) (FOX, 1998)
- Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones (CBS, 1980)
- On Thursday We Leave for Home (The Twilight Zone Season 4 Episode 16) (CBS, 1963)  
(available on YouTube and Amazon Prime)
- The Manchurian Candidate (United Artists, 1962)
- Isaac and Ishmael (The West Wing Season 3 Episode 0) (NBC, 2001)

Homework: Discussion on whether cults are protected and if they should be protected. [Builds the writing skill of taking a defending a position]

Journal: Is freedom of religion still respected? [Requires the student to consider the current context for an historical concept.]

***Week 8-9: Freedom of press***

## Reading Materials:

Mike Lindell ordered to pay \$5 million in election fraud challenge: [MyPillow founder Mike Lindell ordered to pay \\$5 million in election data dispute : NPR](#)

## Viewing Materials:

- All the President's Men (Warner Bros., 1976)
- Citizen Kane (RKO Radio Pictures, 1941)
- The Post (Twentieth Century Fox, 2017)
- The China Syndrome (Columbia Pictures, 1979)
- Nothing But the Truth (Yari Film Group, 2008)
- Mediastan (Julian Assange, 2013)
- The Fifth Estate (Walt Disney Studios, 2013)

Discussion: Journalists are often viewed as heroes for exposing important issues and sometimes find that their ethics require them to keep their sources private. Under what circumstances do you think a journalist should be forced to reveal sources and what impact do you think forcing a journalist to do so has on a free press? [Serious liberties require serious people to enforce them; students need to communicate the importance of these rights by considering a variety of impacts on real issues.]

Homework: Create a news report about a past event and report it as though it just happened. This can be done as group or individual projects. If you wish to include other people, they do not necessarily need to be in the class. Critique the report of another student that will be assigned to you to determine if they captured the seriousness of the event and the impact it had on the people living during that time. Remember, you are not stating if you agree or disagree, just if your fellow students

supported their positions. [The focus of assignment includes research of a past event and time travel on how it would have been reported in the context of the time]

Examples:

- Civil rights marchers attacked
- Kristallnacht
- Salem Witch Trials
- HUAC persecutions

You can also pick your own to report about.

***Week 10-11: Freedom of assembly***

Viewing Materials:

- Good night, and Good Luck (Warner Independent Pictures, 2005)
- Selma (Paramount Pictures, 2014)
- The Gregory March footage (Chicago Film Archives, 1968, available on YouTube) [Police Power and Freedom of Assembly: The Gregory March \(1968, Film Group\) \(youtube.com\)](#)
- Milk (Focus Features, 2008)
- Malcolm X (Warner Bros., 1992)

Creative Products:

Discussion: Write a letter to the editor on rights and/or movements are still being suppressed? Is suppression ever justified, like wartime deserters? [Building the skill of persuasion to a wide audience of readers.]

Assignment: Write a speech to deliver to a group of people-like a crowd of protestors-about an issue you feel is important. (Optional: You can film yourself delivering this speech.) Critique the speech

of another student that you will be assigned to and determine if they supported their position.

[Speechwriting builds the skill of persuasion and backing up an argument.]

***Week 12: Right to Petition***

Video lecture on how this right is at the heart of everything we do and without it, there is no hope for change

Viewing Materials:

Suffragette (Twentieth Century Fox, 2015)

Iron-Jawed Angels (HBO Films, 2004)

The Indians in the Lobby (The West Wing Season 3 Episode 7) (NBC 2001)

Transcript available on [westwingtranscripts.com](http://westwingtranscripts.com).

Creative product:

Discussion: What laws, expansions, and limits do we need today?

Journal 1: Think of all the changes that happened and how they started. How do you make your realization that there is a problem with society which requires a process for change?

Journal 2: Are you a registered voter? Do you vote? Why or why not? Do you think it matters?

[These writing assignments require solid thought on the problems of the modern world and a prediction on how these new communication methods affect established rights.]

***Week 13: Wrap-Up: What Have We Learned, Charlie Brown?***

The First Amendment in the digital age: Twitter/X; Alex Jones; blogs and podcasts.

What additional opportunities do you see for expression? What risks do you see for First

Amendment rights as a result of developing technologies? How do we police them? Should we police them?

Suggested Research:

ACLU: Technology and Liberty: Internet Free Speech.

Washington Post: Want to regulate social media? The First Amendment may stand in the way.

Oremus, Will. May 2022. [First Amendment may stand in way of regulating social media companies - The Washington Post](#)

Brennan Center: Online Speech and the First Amendment: Ten Principles from the Supreme Court. [First Amendment Principles 2019-FINAL Interactive O0JA9oV.pdf](#)

**Final Project**: Choose a relevant film and do a movie review. Pick one from the class or one that you feel should have been included. Write a review focusing on the First Amendment issues presented. Support your thoughts with research on the background of the chosen film and its importance to the First Amendment issues as evidenced by other authors and their opinions; be prepared to disagree if necessary. Your paper should be 6-8 pages and should have minimum of 8 sources; please use MLA format.

Alternate Project: Write your own pitch (tell them your vision) for a movie with a First Amendment focus. Define the concept involved, the story you want to tell, and why you think it is an important story to tell. Defend the need for your film with research on the topic and prior films on the issue. Length should be 6-8 pages with a minimum of 8 sources; source references and research paper section should be in MLA format.