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English Language
Center

Participating in Campus Film Screenings

created by

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What is our Film Screening Participation Guide?

Our Film Screening Participation Guide was developed to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners at Vanderbilt University a tool for engaging in film screening events around campus initiatives. The guide consists of strategies and language that support students' film screening event participation and ways to find more information on related campus initiatives.

The Film Screening Participation Guide provides:

- viewing strategies for maximizing understanding and retention;
- approaches to film discussion participation;
- phrases for productive discussions; and
- campus resources to further students' understanding of campus initiatives.

To illustrate the strategies provided, the guide uses hypothetical student examples based on the documentary film, *I Am Not Your Negro*¹. These examples can be found in the gold boxes following each strategy. Lastly, although this guide emphasizes film screening events around campus initiatives, the information provided can be applied to other types of film screening events, such as film screenings connected to university courses or broader community programming.

Introduction

A film screening is viewing a film, which might be a documentary or fictionalized film, for the purpose of focusing on how the content depicts a particular topic or issue.

Campus groups often use film screenings to promote or continue discussions around campus initiatives. Campus initiatives often focus on the social and cultural aspects of student and community life. Such initiatives may be related to topics and issues, such race, bias, gender, identity, and mental health.

International students sometimes find it challenging to understand campus initiatives and how to engage in campus film screenings to better understand these initiatives. One reason is that the initiatives and films often take a rather localized approach to the topics they are addressing. Because of this local focus, it can be challenging for international students who may not be aware of the historical, cultural, and social concepts associated with the content of the film or discussion. However, with strategies for understanding and participation, film screening events can be an engaging and productive way to learn about campus initiatives.

The Film

Film screening events generally begin with viewing the film, sometimes in advance of the event or sometimes with the other participants as part of the event. What viewing strategies do you use when watching films, especially when the film's context may be unfamiliar to you? What do you do to support your understanding of a film in preparation for discussion? This guide's strategies are divided into three categories: strategies for before viewing the film, strategies for viewing the film, and strategies for after viewing the film.

Before Viewing the Film

To better understand the film, begin considering the topic of focus before viewing the film.

Consider the current relevance of the film.

- Which campus group is hosting the film screening?
- Is the event connected to specific campus departments or areas of specialization?

¹ Peck, R., Peck, H., & Grellety, R. (Producers), & Peck, R. (Director). (2016). *I Am Not Your Negro* [Motion picture]. United States: Kino Lorber.
[The Vanderbilt University English Language Center](#)

- Why is this event being held now?
- How is the film's topic received?

“The Peabody Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is organizing the event with support from The Black Cultural Center. My department is being encouraged to go, but it's open to all schools and departments. The event is probably being held now because racial injustice continues to be an issue in the U.S. I think that it's a pretty sensitive topic.”

Recall what you already know about the film's topic.

- What types of information and key vocabulary might you hear?
- What have you learned about the topic previously?
- How might the film's topic connect to previous information you have received?

“The film might include information about the civil rights movement, race, segregation, and discrimination.”

“The film's topic might connect with a discussion that I had with an American friend on race in the U.S.; an article that I read in the Vanderbilt Hustler on the renaming of a campus building due to its former namesake being a slave owner; or my visit to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis where I first learned about the civil rights movement.”

While Viewing the Film

To better understand and retain the information presented in the film, view the film actively with a plan for what type of information to seek out and ways to find that information.

Listen for gist.

- What are the film's main ideas and how are they connected to one another?

Gist is the main idea(s) of a speech or written text. To find the film's gist, listen for words that are repeated frequently and/or stressed. Stressed words are often followed by a pause in speech.

“Examples of words that are stressed and frequently repeated in ‘I Am Not Your Negro’ are Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcom X (also referred to as “these three men”), white people, black people, America(n), hate, power, and hope.”

“Based on the repeated phrases, we might determine that a main idea of the film is how the work of these three men furthered the civil rights movement and the roles of hate, power, and hope in the movement.”

Detect signposts.

- What information follows phrases that introduce a shift in the narrative?
- What information follows phrases of restatement, emphasis, or summary?

Signposts are words or phrases that show the movement of information. Signposts are frequently used in U.S. communication to help ensure the audience follows the flow of information and understands how the information is connected. Some signposts introduce a shift in topic, such as “Next,” “Another consideration is,” or “Lastly.” Other examples of signposts are those that come before a restatement, emphasis, or summary. These might include “Let’s be clear,” “The most important factor,” or “In short.” Paying attention to information that falls after a signpost can help you follow the course of the narrative and decipher the significance of information presented.

“In ‘I Am Not Your Negro’ the statement ‘The real question is what’s going to happen to this country’ is used to point out an overarching question that the film wants the audience to consider.”

“The narrator emphasizes, ‘What I am trying to say to this country, to us, is we must know this, we must realize this, that...’ which is followed by what becomes one of the main messages of the film.”

Listen for details.

- Which details support the main idea?
- Which details are not as important to remember?

It can sometimes be challenging to decipher which details need our close attention and which details we should not focus on as much. The key to making this distinction is to focus most closely on the details that support the main idea of the film.

“Early on, the narrator tells the audience that the three main figures featured in the film, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcom X were all murdered. Details I should probably look for are: Why were they all murdered? What made these figures so significant and potentially such a threat that someone would want to murder them? Was this common? If so, why?”

Watch for visual cues.

- What visuals are used to further the film’s message?
- Why were the selected visuals used?

Visual cues may be images, video clips, or text used to reinforce the film’s message. These cues can introduce new points, support points made, or offer additional details. Visual cues are often used to emphasize an important aspect of the film or to orient the audience.

“In ‘I Am Not Your Negro,’ old movie clips are used as visuals to illustrate the narrator’s points. At one point, James Baldwin states, ‘...the American people are unable to face the fact that I am flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone, created by them.’ Then, a movie clip from ‘Imitation of Life’ (1934) shows the social complexities of racial identification through a situation between a teacher and parent in a primary school classroom.”

“The film uses title cards, like ‘HEROES’ and ‘WITNESS,’ to introduce parts of the story. The film also includes other intertitles, such as ‘I had been in London on this particular night’ to highlight turning points in the narrative. Both strategies helped me follow the story.”

Infer meaning.

- What previous knowledge of yours and clues from the film might support your understanding?
- Can meaning be understood without trying to understand every word?

Inferring allows us to comprehend what we are hearing based on evidence and reasoning, not something that is stated directly. Inferring can also be used when something is stated directly but is not fully understood. To ease your understanding, rely on what you do know to find meaning in the information being presented, and listen to the information in the film in chunks, rather than word-by-word, as that can slow you down and make you miss key information unnecessarily.

“In the film, *Black Panther*, H. Rap Brown, says ‘Violence is as American as cherry pie.’ I had never heard of cherry pie, so I struggled to understand this metaphor. However, I know that pie is a part of American culture. This understanding allowed me to guess that what he was arguing is that violence is a part of American culture.”

After Viewing the Film

Extend the viewing process to help solidify learning and prepare for discussion.

- What are areas of the film that you are unclear about, piqued your curiosity, you see possible connections for, or you want to consider in contexts beyond the film?
- What are 2-3 possible discussion questions that consider the areas that you noted?

It is beneficial to consider possible questions about the film in advance of the discussion. Questions can take many shapes, but they often seek clarification, highlight key moments and figures from a film, connect issues or themes within or outside a film, or consider broader implications.

“While watching, ‘I Am Not Your Negro,’ I noticed that the film uses old movie clips to illustrate its points. After the film, I started considering if there was a particular reason for this strategy and wrote this question down.”

“In the film, the narrator, quoting James Baldwin, says, ‘I still believe that we can do in this country something that has not been done before’ for addressing racism. The narrator continues by discussing the role of the economy and profits in furthering racism in the U.S. Because I am not familiar with U.S. history and economics, I was confused during this part. I made a note to ask about this connection.”

The Film Discussion

Types of film discussion participation

A combination of different engagement approaches occurs in a film discussion.

- seeking clarification on parts of the film that are unclear;
- highlighting moments and figures in the film found to be significant;
- making connections between points in the film and other areas, such as current events, research and projects, other areas of viewer interest; and
- considering questions about the film's topic not addressed by the film.

Strategies for film discussion participation

The following strategies support a positive experience in film discussion participation:

- keeping comments and questions short;
- building on other participants' comments;
- summarizing previous comments and making a connection about what has been said;
- paraphrasing questions for clarity as needed; and
- remembering that, in the U.S. context, thoughts do not have to be well formed to be shared, and polite interruptions are common.

Film Discussion Phrases

The following phrases support productive communication during a film discussion.

Entering a discussion	Keeping your turn in a discussion	Connecting to previous points
I'd like to comment on... If I could say something about... Let me just say... Sorry to interrupt, but... I have a question regarding... I'd like to raise a question about...	There are two points I'd like to make. I have a couple of questions. I have a comment and a question. Two things. First...	As was pointed out... To go along with what a previous participant suggested... To piggyback on a previous comment... Building on an earlier point... I'd like to add that... Let me come back to something that was said concerning... I noticed some of the same things that ___ did, but I also thought...
Asking for more information	Seeking clarification	Providing clarification
Could you be more specific about...? Would you mind elaborating (some)? Can you say more about...? Can you give an example of that? Are there other examples? What are other points of view?	What I understood was...Is that right? I'm hearing that...Is that correct? Could you repeat/explain/rephrase the part about...? Sorry, I didn't catch that. Are you saying...? What was meant by...? The part that I am struggling to understand is... An area of confusion for me is...	Let me try that again. What I mean to say is... To put it another way... I can tell from your face that I didn't explain myself well. Before I go on, I should probably clarify.

Campus Initiative Resources

Vanderbilt offices and programs are equipped to provide information and additional opportunities around campus initiatives. These resources can be helpful for learning about initiatives, finding events around campus initiatives, or getting involved.

- [Vanderbilt University Office of the Provost](#)
- [Vanderbilt University Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)
- [Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center](#)
- [Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center](#)
- [Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Life](#)
- [Office of University Chaplain and Religious Life](#)
- [Student Center for Social Justice and Identity](#)

Individual colleges and schools on campus also have additional resources around campus initiatives.

“After watching ‘I Am Not Your Negro,’ I wanted to learn more about the film’s topic. A [Diversity Toolkit](#) was put together by [Vanderbilt’s Inclusion Initiative & Cultural Competence Committee](#) which helped me identify categories of prejudice and ways to talk about types of injustice. I also visited the [Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) website for a list of campus resources dedicated to ending bias and injustice.”

Kanopy

Kanopy is an online video-streaming service that provides free access to independent and documentary films through partnerships with public libraries and universities. Its collection includes thousands of award-winning films, such as the film, *I Am Not Your Negro*, referenced in this guide. Vanderbilt community members can access [Kanopy](#) with their VUNetID and password.

Summary

Our Participating in Campus Film Screenings resource was developed to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners at Vanderbilt University a tool for engaging in film screening events around campus initiatives and other university and community programming that use films to encourage the exploration and discussion of current issues and topics.

We hope this guide provides you with strategies and resources to better understand and be engaged in such efforts. If you have questions, please contact elc@vanderbilt.edu.

Find this guide and more online at: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/participating-in-campus-film-screenings/>