

## **Restricted Audiences Only: Censorship and Movie Ratings**

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### **Introduction**

Picture this: You're ready to take your six-year-old daughter to see the newest Disney movie at the theatre. You purchase tickets ahead of time and rush in to get your seats. As the movie goes along, you notice there are some jokes and innuendos that surprise you and a couple of fighting scenes. "This can't possibly be right? This movie is G. It's a cartoon for kids." Actually, that movie you're watching is rated PG; meaning "parental-guidance-suggested". This shocks you. My child is five; she isn't ready for PG movies. What probably would surprise you more is hearing that most motion pictures intended for children are rarely rated G anymore. Moreover, the ratings system as a whole has been hotly contested for some time now.

In its simplest format, movie ratings are a form of censorship intended to deem what is appropriate for demographic groups to see. Since its induction the rating system has changed, mostly due in part to shifts in our culture's acceptance of what is age-appropriate for our children to watch. This is the focus for this unit. This unit will address several key issues within the ratings system we currently use for film.

### **Demographics**

My censorship social studies unit will be implemented in my fifth grade classroom at my elementary school in New Castle, DE. We are a small school of approximately 350 students. My classroom consists of 21 students of varying abilities (both regular and special-education identified). Ten percent of my classroom is made up of special education students. However, a large percentage of my students are struggling readers and writers. We are a designated Title I school and our students come mostly from families of middle and low socio-economic backgrounds. All of our school's students are provided with daily free breakfast, lunch, and snack. Our school also has a large English-Language-Learner (ELL) population. Approximately 40% percent of our school children are identified as ELL. Therefore, my unit will be taught to a full spectrum of students from various backgrounds and abilities. My unit will mostly be taught during social studies time. Social studies occurs once a week for a 90-minute block of time.

### **Rationale**

At first starting the seminar, I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to focus on. I thought, "censorship- pretty simple, I'll teach kids about why they aren't allowed to see certain

things”. What I didn’t expect, was to learn about how complicated censorship and how it is used pretty much everywhere, and how many topics you can explore under the umbrella of censorship. My students this year are extremely curious and they like learning the “why” about topics around them. The moment that I started to get some inkling about what I wanted to do was when I wanted to show my students a video on YouTube one day and when I clicked the link I wanted, it was blocked because of what our filters deemed “inappropriate” for our students to see. This puzzled me. I knew the content of the video and felt that it was acceptable for my students to watch, but apparently that didn’t comply with what YouTube thought. My students didn’t understand either—“why can’t we see it? My teacher wants me to see it, but I can’t”. This got me thinking even more.

In my classroom, my students can earn class rewards and a couple of months ago they picked a movie party. I though—perfect! I’ll pick up the most recent release of a “kid-appropriate” movie from the local RedBox. My district has a rule that our students can only watch G-rated films and only clips of PG-rated films. What I realized while scrolling through the RedBox inventory was that the selection of G-rated films is miniscule. Almost every recent movie release intended for kids is rated PG.

I know from experience and from talking to my students that they watch PG, PG-13, and even R-rated movies. At the beginning of this school year, my students were talking about how their favorite movie was Fast and Furious 7—which is rated PG-13. Many of my former students have mentioned seeing scary movies—which more often than not are rated R. The majority of my 5<sup>th</sup> graders are nine or ten years old. So how is it that they have been exposed to this film?

This unit about censorship and movie ratings will serve as an additional unit or exploration as part of social studies and ELA curriculum. The social studies portion of the unit will explore the relation of censorship and movie ratings to the First Amendment. Part of our social studies curriculum is to explore the Bill of Rights. The ELA component of this unit is to have the students do opinion-based writing. The students will explore the different perspectives of the movie ratings system. Is it effective or not? The overarching goals of this unit will focus on students having an understanding of the key values of the First Amendment so that they understand their essential human rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. In addition, there will be a focus in discussions on what happens when we accept a general rule in our society, like for example, movie ratings. Debate will be an essential element of the teaching practices incorporated in this unit. Students should feel comfortable sharing their opinions of movie ratings and be able to support that opinion when faced with opposing viewpoints.

## **Background**

## The First Amendment

Speech. Press. Religion. Assembly. These words are powerful. And these words need to be understood by students. These rights given to us from the First Amendment have been so often tested and contested. So much so, that censorship and the blockade of people's opinions have become hot button topics in our world today. It is essential that citizens understand their First Amendment rights so they can be impactful and impressionable citizens in their own society.

The First Amendment was written for the purpose of guaranteeing Americans basic freedoms. When the Constitution was signed in 1787, it did not include the basic freedoms that we know now as the freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly. Those rights were not added until the Bill of Rights in 1791.<sup>1</sup> Justice Robert Jackson wrote in the 1943 case of *West Virginia v. Barnette* that the First Amendment ensures that "if there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein".<sup>2</sup> Without the First Amendment, the government could have the power to enforce a national religion, people wouldn't be allowed to protest based on their beliefs, and we wouldn't be able to speak our minds freely. It's important to highlight this truth to our students that we can't take our freedoms for granted.

At an age where students are so impressionable and truly begin to shape their own beliefs and opinions, it is important for them to understand why these rights exist. One of the things my students love doing is debating. They enjoy trying to prove their point and trying to convince their peer to believe the same way. Justice William Brennan of the Supreme Court said during the case of *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* in 1964 that, the First Amendment provides that "debate on public issues [should be]...uninhibited, robust, and wide open".<sup>3</sup>

## Censorship

Webster's dictionary states that to "censor" means to "examine in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable." Censorship happens when one person or a group of people succeed in suppressing one's speech, expression, or opinions in which they believe to be offensive.<sup>4</sup> But why do we need to care about censorship? Isn't censorship there to protect me? In some cases, yes. But, what about when you yourself are being censored?

Censorship exists in many forms. The two main forms of censorship are preventive and punitive. Preventative censorship takes place before an expression is made. Punitive censorship takes place after an expression (either of speech, religion, assembly, or press) is made public. Both forms of censorship occur everyday of our lives.<sup>5</sup> Nearly anything

can be censored: speech, books, art, films, photography, television, radio, Internet, and even the news. The most common forms of censorship are moral censorship, political censorship, media censorship, and corporate censorship. For this unit, movie ratings most apply to media and corporate censorship. Movie ratings are given and allocated through the Motion Picture Association of America, not the government. Therefore, it is a form of private, corporate censorship of the media, specifically pertaining to film.

The purpose of censorship has always been to prevent and remove material which the society should not see or have access to. Censorship is a means to block or prevent the acquiring of knowledge which may cause trouble, create controversy, offend an audience, incite lawsuits, or to shield children or groups of people from offensive material.<sup>6</sup> According to the New World Encyclopedia, the rationale for censorship is that it protects three basic social institutions: the family, the church, and the state. It is any “objectionable material that may be considered immoral, obscene, heretical or blasphemous, seditious or treasonable, or injurious to the nation security.”<sup>7</sup>

Censorship doesn't come without opposition and therefore has arguably been a controversial issue since the birth of the constitution, especially when the First Amendment guarantees your rights of basic freedoms. Where the moral line lies is what is most commonly disputed. Where do we draw the line between violating First Amendment rights and censoring justly? It becomes difficult to define what material might actually pose a danger to a society or a group of people. Who decides what is and isn't appropriate for people to hear, see, read, or experience? For the purpose of movie ratings, the purpose is more so about protecting audiences, specifically children. The MPAA is who is in charge of this role, protecting our future society from hazardous material like sex, violence, and language.

Government and private censors consistently try to impose what they deem to be acceptable or appropriate. Censors try to use the power of the state to impose their view of what is truthful and appropriate, or offensive and objectionable, on everyone else.<sup>8</sup> According to *Morality in Media*, “the word “censorship” means “prior restraint” of First Amendment rights by government.”<sup>9</sup> This more so applies to preventative censorship, meaning to prevent material from reaching audiences. Other definitions of censorship focus on punitive censorship, meant to punish those for their expression. Movie ratings are created by the MPAA to impose their own view of appropriateness for film audiences; hence, it applies to preventative censorship. Their purpose is to prevent film material from reaching inappropriate audiences.

The debate before us as citizens rests in how much we truly want to be protected or censored. On one hand, and in certain circumstances, “yes, I want to be protected from material deemed inappropriate or obscene”. But on the other hand, “no, it's my right to see, hear, read, express, anything that I want.”

At the core of the First Amendment, censorship by the government is supposed to be unconstitutional. Throughout history though, we have seen there are regulations and restrictions. The U.S. Supreme Court has held that federal and state laws regulating the “time, place, and manner” of expressive activity, such as noise ordinances or parade permits, must be “content neutral”—meaning, “The government cannot limit expression just because any listener, or even the majority of a community, is offended by its content.” This means we must tolerate things that we find offensive, or just in poor taste.<sup>10</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum are categories of expression that the Supreme Court has ruled are outside the protection of the First Amendment, such as obscenity. The Supreme Court has established a definition of obscenity and how to test if a material is obscene. The definition changed over several court cases and the final one arose in the case of *Miller v. California* (1973). The following criteria must be in order for a content to be considered obscene:

- “a) Whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest
- b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law
- C) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value”.<sup>11</sup>

Justice Potter Stewart’s famous words were, “I know it when I see it”.<sup>12</sup> Several highlights can be made looking at this test that the Supreme Court created and edited several times. Firstly, in part (a) they describe what must be “contemporary community standards”. Specifically what must be thought about here is how society has emerged and evolved. What was considered morally appropriate fifty years ago has definitely changed. This shows that the obscenity test will evolve based on what the society at that point in time considers appropriate. Part (c) is of also great interest because it states that if anything has some kind of literary, artistic, political, or scientific value that it would pass the obscenity test. It is the goal of movie ratings to make sure that anything that could be deemed obscene is flagged, rated, and prevented from reaching the hands of inappropriate audiences, most importantly children.

## Movie Ratings

So what does the First Amendment and censorship have to do with movie ratings? Originally, the First Amendment did not protect films. In 1915, in the case of *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, the Supreme Court held that the First Amendment could not protect movies. However, going forward this was changed.

In 1922 William Hays formed the Motion Picture Association of America, which is now known as the MPAA. It was established to support the motion picture industry as an advocate.<sup>13</sup> The Hays Code of 1930 became a code to govern the making of film. The purpose of the Hays Code was to establish guidelines for movie producers to follow when making a motion picture. Producers recognized their responsibility to the public audience because films can be so influential to people all over the world.<sup>14</sup> Though motion pictures are primarily seen as entertaining without explicit teaching, they knew that indirectly they can be responsible for moral progress. The Hays Code would therefore bring motion pictures to a higher level of wholesome entertainment for people. There were 3 current general principles applied to the Hays Code.

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.<sup>15</sup>

Changes occurred in 1952 during the case of *Burstyn v. Wilson*. Censors in New York had deemed the film, "*The Miracle*", "sacrilegious". At the conclusion of this case the U.S. Supreme Court expressed that "motion pictures are a significant medium for the communication of ideas".<sup>16</sup> This case confirmed that motion pictures were protected under the First Amendment as "Freedom of Expression."<sup>17</sup>

In 1968, the MPAA established its first ratings system. Their purpose was to provide parents with information in advance about the content of the movies that they may watch. Ratings were created and assigned by a board of individuals who view the film and consider the following factors: violence, sex, language, drug use, and thematic elements. They then assign a rating to the film based on what they believe the majority of American would also assign it.<sup>18</sup> Soon after the ratings were established, major studios began participating in the ratings system. It has been proven that films that are unrated don't do well at the box office. Imagine a parent wanting to take their child to a film labeled with no rating. Would they trust what they are walking in to see? Film producers quickly realized that not applying and submitting to the ratings system would lead to a financially unsuccessful film.

Over time, the ratings system has gone through many changes. In 1968 the original ratings system was much different than it looks today. Of course, with social norms changing, ratings had to evolve at the same time. In 1968, the ratings looked as follows: G for general audiences, M for mature audiences, R for restricted (no one under 16), and X for adults only.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, there was confusion over the M rating, so it was changed to GP—for general audiences with parental guidance (what we now call PG). In the mid

1980s’, the PG-13 rating was created as a mid-point between PG and R. This got started from controversy over several Steven Spielberg’s films. Films like “*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*”, “*Poltergeist*”, and “*Gremlins*” had all been “receiving PG ratings despite the amount of gore and unsettling images.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the creation of the PG-13 rating. With the inception of a PG rating, children under 17 could be admitted to a film without a parent or guardian present. However, it is noted that the parents are “strongly cautioned” to be aware of potential thematic elements, violence, language, or sexual content.<sup>21</sup> In September of 1990, the MPAA changed the X rating to NC-17 because in the 1980s, the pornography market had taken over the X rating.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the MPAA added reasons to each rating (see image below) to better inform the audience of what each rating meant. Criteria for each leveled rating provided more information for how each rating could be reached. Examples of explanations included “mild violence”, “brief nudity”, “thematic elements”, and “strong language”.

<b>G</b>	<b>GENERAL AUDIENCE</b> <b>ALL AGES ADMITTED</b>
Signifies that the film rated contains nothing most parents will consider offensive for even their youngest children to see or hear. Nudity, sex scenes, and scenes of drug use are absent; violence is minimal; snippets of dialogue may go beyond polite conversation but do not go beyond common everyday expressions.	
<b>PG</b>	<b>PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED</b> <b>SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN</b>
Signifies that the film rated may contain some material parents might not like to expose to their young children; material that will clearly need to be examined or inquired about before children are allowed to attend the film. Explicit sex scenes and scenes of drug use are absent; nudity, if present, is seen only briefly; horror and violence do not exceed moderate levels.	
<b>PG-13</b>	<b>PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED</b> <b>SOME MATERIAL MAYBE INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 13</b>
Signifies that the film rated may be inappropriate for pre-teens. Parents should be especially careful about letting their younger children attend. Rough or persistent violence is absent; sexually-oriented nudity is generally absent; some scenes of drug use may be seen; some use of harsher sexually-derived words may be heard.	
<b>R</b>	<b>RESTRICTED</b> <b>UNDER 17 REQUIRES ACCOMPANYING PARENT OR ADULT GUARDIAN</b>
Signifies that the rating board has concluded that the film rated may contain some adult material. Parents are urged to learn more about the film before taking their children to see it. An R may be assigned due to, among other things, a film's language, theme, violence, sex or its portrayal of drug use. I.D. required for ALL "R" rated movies. Under 17 requires an accompanying adult guardian 21 or older. CHILDREN 11 and under will NOT be allowed into the last showing of the day, on each screen, of any "R" rated movie.	
<b>NC-17</b>	<b>NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED</b> <b>NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED</b>
Signifies that the rating board believes that most American parents would feel that the film is patently adult and that children age 17 and under should not be admitted to it. The film may contain explicit sex scenes, an accumulation of sexually-oriented language, and/or scenes of excessive violence. The NC-17 designation does not, however, signify that the rated film is obscene or pornographic in terms of sex, language or violence.	

The ratings system that we know today has been full of controversy and debate. There are misconceptions about what separates a film from one rating to another. Today, a “silent economic censorship [exists] as many outlets and retailers refuse to carry NC-17 titles.”<sup>24</sup> When it comes to making money, film producers and retailers know that they won’t make as much money on a film labeled NC-17. Filmmakers will edit their films until they have an R-rating to reach as much of the market of consumers as possible. The following sections will examine the debate for and against the ratings system as we see it today. This leads to an understanding that applying ratings to make sure your film is successful could be called a form of market censorship—applying censorship in order to be successful in the world market.

The MPAA establishes all of today’s current ratings. It is important to highlight for students throughout the unit and for your own background that ratings are not a form of

government censorship. Application of ratings is voluntary for movie producers. Applying ratings has been the orthodox for making movies. It has just become a nearly universal way of thinking. Without ratings, movies can be widely unsuccessful.

### An Argument For the Ratings System

Movie ratings were designed to give parents guidance; not to make decisions for them. Parents are supposed to be able to use the ratings system as a guide for what to expect from a film that they might watch with or without their children. It's been recommended by the National PTA that parents use a variety of information to decide what is appropriate for their child to watch.<sup>25</sup>

Joan Graves of the MPAA defends the ratings system that exists today. It is a responsibility that she says they take very seriously. She states "when we assign ratings to films, we do not make qualitative judgments; we are not film critics or censors."<sup>26</sup> According to Graves, the MPAA is guided by a set of established criteria for each rating category. For example, any drug reference in a film will establish an automatic PG-13 rating.<sup>27</sup> For films that are rated R or NC-17, Graves says the rating is not a punishment. It's not about telling people not to see the film; it's about alerting parents and consumers to learn more about the film before going to the theatre.<sup>28</sup> Graves says that one of MPAA's priorities is to be consistent: "whether a film is educational, delightful, terrible, or insightful, ratings are applied based on the level of content in a film."<sup>29</sup>

The MPAA states that "it does not aim to approve or censor any movie, leaving parents the responsibility to decide which movies their children should watch."<sup>30</sup> The main considerations of the MPAA are language, depictions of violence, nudity, and sensuality, depictions of sexual activity and drug use. The MPAA also states that they use modifiers such as "brief" or "some" to guide parents about the levels of each of these areas.<sup>31</sup> Even R-rated films can be viewed by minors. It's all at the discretion of the parent making the decision. Films such as "*Schindler's List*", "*Saving Private Ryan*", and "*The Passion of the Christ*" were rated R, but that didn't stop children or minors from seeing them.<sup>32</sup>

The MPAA also states that their ratings are flexible. They state that their ratings are "meant to consider parental attitudes at the time the motion picture is rated. The raters attempt, as much as possible, to mirror the views of a contemporary cross-section of parents in the country."<sup>33</sup> The MPAA will do their best to try to reflect the views of American parents.

### An Argument Against the Ratings System

Roger Ebert has argued, "the [ratings] system places too much emphasis on not showing sex while allowing the portrayal of massive amounts of gruesome violence."<sup>34</sup> In



addition, he argues that the “rating system is geared toward looking at trivial aspects of the movie (such as the number of times a profane word is used) rather than at the general theme of the movie.”<sup>35</sup>

Julie Hilden states that “a universal rating system would censure otherwise worthwhile products by labeling them “violent”.”<sup>36</sup> She claims “universal ratings violate the First Amendment because they force the media—by compelling them to apply negative labels to their works—to involuntarily speak against themselves.”<sup>37</sup>

Nicholas Ransbottom of *The Charleston Gazette* finds that the movie ratings system is utterly useless. He claims “what started as an attempt to guide parents on whether or not a film was appropriate for children has turned into a process to bastardize the artistic nature of film by giving it a rating.”<sup>38</sup> Gustafson claims that the MPAA plays favorites. He finds that the MPAA tends to let films off the hook depending on how they handle violence. His best example comes from the film, *Saving Private Ryan*, which is disturbing, but because the MPAA claimed the violence was historical and artistic, using slow motion and dramatic music and how the violence was handled, the film’s rating was toned down.<sup>39</sup>

Ransbottom argued that movie ratings would do nothing to stop temptation. He states that, “when you tell people they aren’t allowed to do something, they’re going to want to do it more than ever.”<sup>40</sup> An argument can be made that more recently there is little consistency in the system. The categories tend to lump movies together that differ extremely in their content.<sup>41</sup>

The MPAA ratings can also be misleading. Upon reading the description, “extended intense violence and frightening images” might sound like it must be an R-rating. However, it was actually a description of the film, “*Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*”. This film was approved by the MPAA for children as young as eleven. The film managed to keep its PG-13 rating, despite having an inclusion of nudity in the extended version.<sup>42</sup> Moviegoers are now having a hard time predicting what a film from a specific category will be like. Films as different as “*Les Miserables*”, “*Pitch Perfect*”, and the “*Hunger Games*” were all assigned a PG-13 rating. We’re living in an age where violence and dark images are getting PG-13 ratings.<sup>43</sup> With such inconsistencies, consumers are having a harder time understanding what content might be in the movie they watch, or even let their kids watch.

#### G vs. PG vs. PG-13 Debate

According to Rob Gustafson, “the PG-13 rating is the box office “sweet spot.” PG-13, PG, and G ratings impose no age restrictions at the box office. Theoretically, a six-year-old can walk into a movie theatre and go into a PG-13 film.”<sup>44</sup> He claims that from a

moneymaking perspective, PG-13 is the best rating because it allows the most access from consumers. Whereas, an R-rating would require a parent to accompany a minor.

There has been a definite shift in the rating of G and PG-rated movies. Film industries have been aggressively shifting G audiences into the PG category. As our society has evolved and changed and become more accepting of language, innuendo, and violence, studios have become more confident that parents will risk a few seconds or minutes of risqué scenes in children's films acceptable.<sup>45</sup> After all, we don't really live in a June Cleaver, G-rated-world anymore.

It's all about marketing. Films that are rated on the extremes—too harmless or too harmful--won't attract a big enough market. Thus, the same middle ground is PG. In 2012, only 276 G-rated films were made, compared to 2,027 PG-13 movies, 986 PG movies, and 3,575 R-rated films.<sup>46</sup> Nowadays, if a movie is rated G, it alienates the preteens, teens, and adults. Pixar films have recently shifted to more PG material.

Consistent with this idea, Pixar started releasing their films with PG ratings. Films such as "Brave" and "Despicable Me 2" scored PG ratings for "rude humor and mild action".<sup>47</sup> Theoretically, there isn't much of a G rating anymore. We've all seemed to have gotten used to animated kids movies having more mature story lines.<sup>48</sup> In Disney's 1990's era, animated characters could "break necks onscreen, have characters nap with corpses, hang villains, and still get a G."<sup>49</sup> Yet, the recent success of Disney's Frozen was cited for having "mild action and rude humor" and received a PG rating. It seemed that times really have changed. We've gone from G-rated films like "Babe" that mention where meat really comes from to films like "Brave" that earned a PG rating for having a bear that roars a few times and a character that shoots arrows.<sup>50</sup>

## **Teaching Strategies**

The following lessons address activities and strategies that will be used to teach the concepts of censorship, the First Amendment, and movie ratings. The activities will guide students through first having an understanding of censorship, followed by a background on the purpose of movie ratings. The unit culminates in having students debate the use of G and PG.

### **Investigation One: What is censorship?**

The purpose of this investigation is to introduce students to the concept of censorship. This lesson will activate students thinking about what censorship is, why it happens, and who does it. The lesson will then tie to an understanding of the First Amendment. By the end of this lesson students will understand that censorship is when a person or group prevents us from expressing ideas, speaking freely, or viewing material. There are many

sources from which censorship can come from, and there are many reasons that someone or a group might censor.

I will launch the unit by giving the students the censored document located in Appendix B. Give the students a minute or two to look at the document and make observations and wonders to themselves. Students can then talk to a partner or in groups about what they observed and wondered. Student responses should be similar to: “words were blacked out”, “I can’t read the whole thing”, “and I wonder why there are parts I can’t read”. Proceed by having a class discussion about what they think is blacked out. Possible responses: “something I’m not allowed to read”, “words that are bad”, and “words that are secret”. Next, move the discussion towards who might have blacked out the words. Students may initially think that their teacher would. Discuss the teacher as a possibility and lead students towards other possibilities such as: the principal, parents, government, companies, etc. Now, introduce the word censorship and ask students if they’ve heard the word before. Explain what censorship is in kid-friendly terms such as: preventing someone from expressing their beliefs, ideas, opinions AND preventing someone or a group from seeing or hearing something. An optional next step could be to have students complete a KWL chart on the word censorship.

Next, choose one of the possible censors and discuss why they might have censored the document. Have students come up with possible reasons like: “the blocked out words might be dangerous”, “the blocked out words might have profanity”, and “the censor might think I’m too young to see those parts”. Proceed by writing the following words on chart paper: books, movies, TV, music. Ask the students to talk in partners or groups if they think censorship happens in any of those four categories. Possible responses: “books have been banned”, “movies have ratings”, and “music has bleeps”. Encourage rich discussion in this area in terms of why their parents could be censors. Focus on the idea that parents want to shield them from seeing things that are “too grown-up” for them. Now, on chart paper or Smart Board, display the First Amendment. Discuss what it is and how it protects students. Have a discussion about whether censorship violates their First Amendment rights. Offer an example of a song with profanity. Students would relate to this concept. Students already know that at school if they want to hear a certain song that they need to look up a “clean version”. Ask if the radio bleeping the profanity prevents them from a freedom of expression. At the conclusion of this lesson, give the students an exit ticket on parent censorship and have them write about a time their parent might have tried to censor them and why. Look for evidence that students understand what censoring means and why a parent could be a censor.

## **Investigation Two: The Movie Ratings System**

The purpose of this investigation is to introduce the movie ratings system to students. Students will examine the different ratings and examine their feelings about the ratings. Students will also view short clips from films and use a checklist to analyze their rating.

By the end of this lesson students will learn about the ratings system, why it was created, and its purpose. Students will predict ratings of familiar films to see if the ratings are accurate. For the purpose of age appropriateness, use violence as the main discussion topic for a choice in rating.

Launch this lesson by displaying the ratings system that is used today. Give each student a copy to view (Appendix C). Ask students where they have seen these codes. Have students talk in pairs or groups about these codes and what they think their purpose is. Possible responses: “I’ve seen them before movie trailers”, “I always seen them on the DVD box”, “I think they tell people who should watch the movie”. Next, introduce the idea that these codes are ratings. Talk about their purpose with the students. Why do these ratings exist? Look at each category on the ratings and have students predict who watches movies in each rating. For example, “who or what age watches a G movie”, “who or what age watched an R movie?” Ask students who they think put these ratings on movies? Possible responses: “the people who make the movie”, “the people who sell the movie”, “maybe parents”.

Next, introduce the organization of the MPAA. (\*Optional: show students the MPAA website). Talk about the MPAA and their ratings system. Offer a brief timeline of how the MPAA established their system. Use a timeline of important dates. Some information can be found in the research of this unit. The MPAA also has a timeline on their website.

The next portion of this lesson involves showing the students some video clips. Show a video clip from the film Rocky. Use a clip that involves a boxing match where competitors are getting hit in the face. Rocky is a PG movie. Have students use the violence level worksheet to score the film’s violence from 0 to 3. Have students predict the rating. Repeat this process with the following films: The Flintstones, Annie (2014), and Jaws. Have students rate the violence level and predict the rating (Appendix D). Talk about how all of the films are labeled PG. But why are they PG if some seemed more violent than others? Ask students why some G movies could also be considered violent. Discuss whether or not students think the movie ratings are a good and accurate system. Do they think the system should continue? Why or why not?

To assess this lesson, have students complete the exit ticket in which they choose a film they have seen recently (Appendix E). They should look up what rating the film received and write whether or not they think the film got an accurate rating. Do they think the film was appropriate for them to watch?

### **Investigation Three: G vs. PG & Opinion Writing**

The purpose of this lesson is to have students sort film titles into G and PG categories and discuss any surprising ratings. Students will then think about perspectives of ratings and

do an opinion piece about movie ratings. By the end of this lesson, students will understand why films are categorized into ratings and how ratings relate to censorship. Students will show understanding of what censorship is and showcase knowledge learned throughout the unit in an opinion piece.

Launch this unit by giving students the film sort worksheet (Appendix F). Have them sort titles that they think are G or PG. Many titles should be surprising to them. Use the IMDB database to find the correct answers. Have students discuss in pairs or groups, which answers surprised them. Choose one title to focus on. For example, Frozen. Talk about how Disney films from 10-40 years ago were mostly all considered G. In recent years most films are released with PG ratings. Ask students what has changed recently. Example: “people want the movies to be more entertaining or funnier”, “the movies need to entertain parents too”; “and some examples of violence are more acceptable now”. Talk to students about how the district has a rule that students can only watch G material. Ask them how they feel about this rule. Do they think it violates their First Amendment rights? Do they think they are mature enough to see PG movies while in school? Do they think the ratings do a good job of protecting them from some violent films? Proceed by addressing with students why film production companies want to have a PG rating—because they can be open to larger audiences and therefore make more money.

To conclude the unit of study, students will then choose one of the films listed in the PG or PG-13 category to write an opinion piece. They should use the outline provided (Appendix G) to answer the following essay question—“If you had a younger sibling in Kindergarten, would you want them to watch a film that is rated PG or PG-13?” There are question stems on the outline for students to use to guide their writing. They should address the following questions in their essay:

- a. Why or why not would a PG or PG-13 rating be appropriate for a Kindergartener?
- b. What elements (violence, language) would be seen in a movie with a higher rating?
- c. Who would censor a Kindergartener from watching that film?
- d. Why would someone feel the need to censor a Kindergartener from that film?
- e. Is the Kindergartener’s First Amendment rights violated by being censored from the film?

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## **Appendices**

### Appendix A- Standards Addressed

The plan for the students is to meet the following standards. English/Language Arts literacy standards are used for when students complete the final lesson in which they will write an opinion piece. Civics standards are addressed when learning about the First Amendment.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.1: *Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.* Students will be asked to use textual evidence to support their writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.3: *Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.* Students will be asked to write about how the

ratings system and censorship (two ideas) are connected based on information they receive.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.6: *Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.* Students will be asked to think about multiple viewpoints on the effectiveness of censorship and how it related to First Amendment rights.

CIVICS STANDARD ONE 4-5a: *Students will identify the fundamental rights of all American citizens as enumerated in the Bill of Rights.* Students will need to meet a fundamental understanding of the First Amendment.

CIVICS STANDARD TWO 4-5b: *Students will apply the protections guaranteed in the Bill of Rights to an analysis of everyday situations.* Students will be asked to think about how ratings systems effect their everyday life in relation to the First Amendment.

#### Appendix B: Censored Document

██████████. Press. ██████████. Assembly. These words are ██████████. And these words need to be understood by students. These rights given to us from the First Amendment have been so often ██████████. So much so, that ██████████ of people's opinions have become hot button topics in our world today. It is essential that citizens understand their ██████████ so they can be impactful and impressionable citizens in their own society.

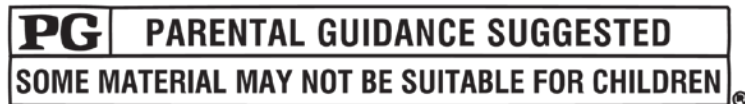
The ██████████ was written for the purpose of ██████████ basic freedoms. When the ██████████ signed in 1787, it did not include the basic freedoms that we know now as the freedom of ██████████. Those rights were not added ██████████.<sup>51</sup> Justice Robert Jackson ██████████ case of *West Virginia v. Barnette* that the ██████████ that "if there is any ██████████, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be ██████████ religion, or force ██████████ by word or act their faith therein".<sup>52</sup> Without the ██████████ the government ██████████ religion, people wouldn't be allowed to protest based on their beliefs, and ██████████ ██████████ to highlight this truth to our students that we can't take our freedoms for granted.

At an age where ██████████ and truly begin to shape their own beliefs and opinions, it is important for them to understand ██████████. One of ██████████ is debating. They enjoy trying to prove their point and



trying to convince their peer [redacted] Brennan of the [redacted] during the case of New York Times Co. v. Sullivan in 1964 that, the [redacted] “debate on public issues [should be]... uninhibited, robust, and wide open”.<sup>53</sup>

Appendix C: Ratings Chart



Who or what age group do you think watches each type of rating?

<b>G</b>	
<b>PG</b>	
<b>PG-13</b>	
<b>R</b>	

<b>NC-17</b>	
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Appendix D: Violence Rating Worksheet

## Rate the Movies

<b>Film Name</b>	<b>Score the Violence from 0-3. 3 is high violence, 0 is no violence</b>	<b>What I think the rating of this film is...</b>
Rocky		
The Flintstones		
Annie		
Jaws		
Fast and Furious (*Optional)		

Appendix E: Exit Ticket: Choose a Movie

Choose a movie that you have seen recently. Look up what rating the movie was given and then answer the following questions in your writing.

- Was the film accurately rated? Why or why not?
- Do you think the film was appropriate for you to watch?

<b>Film I Watched</b>	
<b>Rated</b>	



Appendix F: Film Sort

## SORT THE MOVIES

Sort the following movies into what rating you think they received.

Inside Out	Star Wars	Frozen
Toy Story	The Good Dinosaur	Finding Nemo
The Lion King	Minions	Elf
Cars	Snow White	Harry Potter

<b>G Movies</b> (Intended for All Audiences)	<b>PG Movies</b> (Parental Guidance Suggested)

Appendix G: Outline for Essay

State your opinion on the following issue and support your claim with support.

*If you had a younger sibling in Kindergarten, would you want them to watch a film that is rated PG or PG-13?*

Why or why not would a PG or PG-13 rating be appropriate for a Kindergartener?	
What elements	

(violence, language) would be seen in a movie with a higher rating that you wouldn't want a Kindergartener to see?	
Who would censor a Kindergartener from watching that film?	
Why would someone feel the need to censor a Kindergartener from that film?	
Are the Kindergartener's First Amendment rights violated by being censored from the film?	

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> (ACLU)

<sup>2</sup> (First Amendment Center)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Heins 1993

<sup>5</sup> (Oklahoma State)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> (PBS)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> (ACLU)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> (Motion Picture Association of American)

<sup>14</sup> (Bynum, 2006)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> (ACLU)\*\*Timeline

<sup>17</sup> (Motion Picture Association of American)

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18 (Classification & Ratings Administration)

19 (Filmmaker IQ)

20 Ibid.

21 (Filmbug)

22 (Filmmaker IQ)

23 (Jones)

24 (Filmmaker IQ)

25 (National PTA)

26 (Graves, 2011)

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 (MPAA, 2005)

31 Ibid.

32 (Graves, 2011)

33 (MPAA, 2005)

34 (Filmbug)

35 Ibid.

36 (Hilden, 2000)

37 Ibid.

38 (Ransbottom, 2012)

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 (Harbison)

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 (Gustafson, 2007)

45 (Burnette III, 2013)

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 (Mendelson, 2013)

50 Ibid.

50 (ACLU)

50 (First Amendment Center)

50 Ibid.

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**Curriculum Unit Title**

Restricted Audiences Only: Censorship and Movie Ratings

**Author**

Stacy Nichols

**KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.**

Students will gain an understanding of what censorship is, how it is used, and why it is used. Students will understand how censorship relates to the First Amendment. Students will learn about the movie ratings system and how it is connected to censorship and the First Amendment.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT**

What rights are guaranteed by the First Amendment? What is censorship and how is it used? How are movie ratings used as a form of censorship?

**CONCEPT A**

Censorship

**CONCEPT B**

Movie Ratings System

**CONCEPT C**

G vs. PG Ratings & Opinion Writing

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A**

What is the First Amendment?  
What is censorship? Who censors? Why do they censor?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B**

What is the movie rating system? When and why was it established? Are movie ratings a form of censorship?  
What are movie ratings trying to censor? How are ratings established?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C**

How have G and PG ratings been established and evolved over time?  
What is your opinion of the ratings system from a specific viewpoint?

**VOCABULARY A**

First Amendment, Censor, government

**VOCABULARY A**

MPAA, rating, violence

**VOCABULARY A**

G-rated, PG-rated

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES**

Rocky, Flinstones, Jaws, Fast & Furious, Annie, Frozen