

THE CHOICE 2008 Teacher's Guide

About the Film:

The Choice 2008 is a two-hour examination of the rich personal and political biographies of John McCain and Barack Obama that goes behind the headlines to discover how they arrived at this moment and what their very different candidacies say about America.

Watching the Film:

Ideally, teachers will assign the film for viewing as homework or show the film in class. Suggested discussion questions are provided. The lessons and activities in this guide can be used in the classroom regardless of whether or not the film is viewed.

A Note to Teachers:

The Choice 2008 is a comprehensive FRONTLINE biography studying the character, experience and worldviews of Sens. John McCain and Barack Obama. These teaching activities are designed to help students become more familiar with the candidates in the 2008 presidential contest and to explore the political cultures that shaped their careers and that support their candidacies.

For classes in Social Studies, Language Arts, Current Events and History; grade level 9-12.

Discussion Questions:

Questions for students to discuss after viewing *The Choice 2008*.

FEATURED LESSON PLAN:

Candidate Narratives

Students will become more familiar with:

- The biographies of Sens. McCain and Obama
- How the campaigns are turning these biographies into narratives in campaign 2008
- The benefits and limitations of candidate narratives in campaign discourse
- How the candidate-created narratives compare to the FRONTLINE documentary

ADDITIONAL LESSON IDEAS:

Public Financing of Campaigns

Students will debate the benefits and costs of public funding in campaign 2008.

Voter Mobilization

Students will create nonpartisan youth-mobilization campaigns.

First-time Voters

Students will create educational materials for first-time voters.

Vice Presidency

Students will learn more about the vice presidential selections in campaign 2008.

Purchasing the Video:

The Choice 2008 can be purchased from **Shop PBS for Teachers** (<http://teacher.shop.pbs.org/home/index.jsp>).

Credits:

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Discussion Questions

1. What did you learn about either candidate from watching the film?
2. What surprised you?
3. What do the two candidates have in common?
4. What are some differences between the two candidates?
5. How does Sen. McCain use his biography to connect with voters?
6. How does Sen. Obama use his biography to connect with voters?
7. What were the two candidates' experiences with political life prior to running for president?

FEATURED LESSON PLAN: Candidate Narratives

Lesson Objectives:

In this lesson, students will become more familiar with:

- The biographies of Sens. McCain and Obama
- How the campaigns are turning these biographies into narratives in campaign 2008
- The benefits and limitations of candidate narratives in campaign discourse
- How the candidate-created narratives compare to the FRONTLINE documentary

Materials Needed:

- Internet access
- Access to Internet videos (YouTube) in the classroom *or* access to candidate Web sites
- Student Handout: "Candidate Narratives"

Time Needed:

- 45-75 minutes, depending on the extent of the discussion

Note to Teachers: In this lesson, students will be analyzing candidate narratives. You may find the following information about narratives helpful in preparing your lesson.

Procedure:

1. Introduction:

- Ask students to generate ways that they can be persuaded in a political campaign (examples include speeches, advertisements, debates, etc.). Have a short class discussion about what students know about campaign persuasion.
- Ask students what they know about the lives of Sens. John McCain and Barack Obama. Have a short class discussion about what students know about the lives of these candidates.

2. Making sense of narratives: After students have attempted to answer these questions, give them the handout, "Candidate Narratives."

- Tell students that speeches and debates are obvious forms of persuasion because audiences are anticipating that candidates are attempting to influence them.
- In contrast, candidate narratives (or stories) are less obvious forms of persuasion because audiences may not be anticipating that campaigns are attempting to influence them.
- It is important to listen critically to how campaigns create stories out of the biographies of their candidates.

- As campaigns do so, they do not tell the *entire* story of their candidates' lives. Rather, campaigns select and highlight certain moments and details and hide or ignore other moments and details.
 - Thus, paying close attention to candidate narratives helps us to expose political strategies and how campaigns are trying to argue -- through the subtle form of narrative -- that their candidates are qualified for the presidency.
3. **Film-viewing activity:** Have students watch Sen. McCain's biography film at <http://www.johnmccain.com/About/> (8 minutes, 26 seconds), Sen. Obama's biography film at http://www.barackobama.com/learn/meet_barack.php (9 minutes, 26 seconds), or both.

Note: If Internet access to YouTube is not available in your school, have students read the candidate biographies posted to the McCain and Obama links above.

Have students complete the attached handout ("Candidate Narratives"), recording observations on:

- The timeline of the film/narrative (how it starts and ends)
 - The characterization of the candidates (what biographical data are presented)
 - The details in the film/narrative (what types of events, speakers and audio and visual cues appear)
 - The political strategy behind the film (how the films argue that McCain and Obama are qualified for the presidency)
4. **Share and discuss:** Have students share and discuss their observations. Discuss:
- What is the timeline for the **McCain** film?
 - How does it start?
 - How does it end?
 - What biographical data on **McCain** are presented?
 - What types of events, speakers, and audio and visual cues appear in the film?
 - What is the strategy behind the film?
 - How does the film argue that McCain is qualified for the presidency?
 - What is the timeline for the **Obama** film?
 - How does it start?
 - How does it end?
 - What biographical data on **Obama** are presented?
 - What types of events, speakers and audio and visual cues appear in the film?
 - What is the strategy behind the film?
 - How does the film argue that Obama is qualified for the presidency?

- How do the candidate narratives compare to one another?
 - What are some similarities in the biographical data presented?
 - What are some differences in the biographical data presented?

- How do these candidate narratives compare to the portrayals of McCain and Obama in *The Choice 2008*?
 - What did students learn in *The Choice 2008* that did not appear in the candidate narratives?

- These narrative films are created to help voters relate to the candidates.
 - What are some of the benefits of knowing more about the candidates' personal biographies?
 - What are some ways in which these narratives (which tell only a part of the candidates' personal biographies) might mislead or distract voters?

Optional Homework Assignment: Students may write a narrative emphasizing either positive or negative traits and/or biographical details for one of the candidates.

Method of Assessment:

Class discussion

Submission of handout(s) after discussion

Narrative and Persuasion¹

Note to Teachers: In this lesson, students will be analyzing candidate narratives. You may find the following information helpful in preparing your lesson.

Narratives advance persuasion because:

- They disarm listeners by enchanting them.
- They awaken within listeners dormant experiences and feelings.
- They expose, subtly, some sort of propositional argument.

Scholars have shown that people reason differently in the presence of narrative. Its native features suggest why:

1. Narrative occurs in a natural timeline. There are beginnings, middles and endings to narrative. Once we start on a narrative, we feel compelled to follow it through to its conclusion. All stories, even bad stories, inspire the need to see how they turn out. Narratives always tempt us with closure.
2. Narrative includes characterization. People are interested in people. Narratives are the stories of what people do. Often, narratives introduce interesting people, sometimes grand people, to an audience. When we read or hear such narratives, our natural sense of identification makes us want to find out more about the lives of the people described.
3. Narrative presents detail. A good story, such as a fine novel, transports us to another time or place by offering fine-grained treatments. When the narrator describes the clothes people wear or the customs they follow or the dialect they speak, we come to know that time and place as if it were our own. Details captivate.
4. Narrative is fundamental. No culture exists without narrative. Most cultures celebrate their sacred narratives on a regular basis (for example, a Fourth of July celebration) and indoctrinate their young by means of narrative (for example, fairy tales). Narrative appeals to the child in us, because, unlike life, it contains a complete story with certain consequences.

¹ From: Hart, R. P. (1990). *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*. New York: Harper Collins. Pp. 132-138.

**STUDENT HANDOUT:
Candidate Narratives**

Note to students: Candidate speeches or debate performances are obvious forms of persuasion. In those events, audiences *know* the candidates are attempting to influence them. Candidate narratives are less obvious types of persuasion. In these instances, audiences *may not be anticipating* how the candidates are attempting to influence them.

Please watch the candidate narratives or read their biographies and complete the chart below to expose how the McCain and Obama campaigns are attempting to persuade voters of their qualifications for the presidency.

	Sen. John McCain	Sen. Barack Obama
Timeline: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the opening image of the film (or the first sentence of the biography)?• How does the film or biography end?		

<p>Characterization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• List biographical data listed in the film or biography.		
<p>Details:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• List events, speakers and audio and visual cues in the film. What words are used to describe the candidate? • Why do these details appear?		

<p>Strategy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does this film or biography argue that the candidate is qualified for the presidency? • Are these strong arguments? Why? (Or why not?) 		
<p>Comparison to <i>The Choice 2008</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the film compare to the portrayal of the candidates in <i>The Choice 2008</i>? • What did you learn in <i>The Choice 2008</i> that did not appear in the candidate narratives? 		

ADDITIONAL LESSON IDEAS

Public Financing of Campaigns

Invite students to research the role of public financing in the 2008 presidential campaign.

- First, direct them to the Center for Responsive Politics' "Banking on Becoming President" Web site to learn more about how much money the candidates in 2008 have raised (<http://www.opensecrets.org/pres08/>) and how these numbers compare to 2004 (<http://www.opensecrets.org/pres04/index.php?cycle=2004>).
- Then, ask them to become more familiar with the history and goals of public financing in campaigns on the Common Cause Web site (<http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=1389223>).
 - What are some reasons why public financing emerged in the United States?
 - What are some benefits of this option for presidential candidates?
 - What are some limitations?
 - Will the benefits outweigh the risks?
 - Should the system be reformed?
 - If no, why? If so, how?

Sen. Obama will not be accepting public funds in 2008

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/20/us/politics/20obamacnd.html?hp>).

- How do students think this decision will affect the election? Why?

Internet Resources

Common Cause (Presidential Public Financing)

<http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=1389223>

This detailed explanation of the presidential public financing system in Q-and-A format is provided by Common Cause, a nonpartisan advocacy organization founded by John Gardner as a vehicle for citizens to make their voices heard in the political process.

Center for Responsive Politics ("Banking on Becoming President")

<http://www.opensecrets.org/pres08/>

This site allows users to track where each candidate's financial support comes from, how it is spent, and how that money affects policy and citizens' lives.

The Campaign Finance Institute

<http://www.cfinst.org/>

This nonpartisan institute, affiliated with The George Washington University, provides information and research about campaign finance and campaign finance reform.

Related Lesson Plans on PBS Sites

NOW -- Campaign Finance Reform

<http://www.pbs.org/now/classroom/campaignfinance.html>

By the People -- Campaign Finance Simulation

http://www.pbs.org/elections/kids/lessons/lesson_plan4.html

Voter Mobilization

Direct students to the "Young Voter Mobilization Tactics" booklet created by the Graduate School of Political Management at The George Washington University (http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Young_Voters_Guide.pdf).

- Break students into small groups and tell them they have been given \$100,000 to create a nonpartisan voter mobilization campaign for 18-to-24-year-olds in their state.
- Have them create a plan for spending this money. In doing so, have them decide which three pieces of advice (from the "Mobilization Tactics" booklet) they will be sure to follow.
- Also, ask them which three pieces of advice they will not follow.
- After students present their spending plans to the class, ask:
 - What are the most surprising patterns from this research?
 - What are some of the most empowering patterns from this research for young voters?
 - What are some of the most important ways to tailor this research to young voters in your town? In your state?

Internet Resources

Rock the Vote

<http://www.rockthevote.com>

"Rock the Vote uses music, popular culture and new technologies to engage and incite young people to register and vote in every election." Students can register to vote, watch videos, read youth perspectives on the election, and listen to the music of Rock the Vote artists.

CIRCLE (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) <http://www.civicyouth.org/>

This site offers research and information about the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25.

Related Lesson Plan on PBS Site
Linking Youth, Politics, Social Media

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/vote2008/blueprint/pdfs/pbs-teachers-vote2008-rd-3.1.pdf>

First-time Voters

The largest obstacle preventing many young voters from casting a ballot is that they don't know how to vote.

- Have students create instructions to help 18-year-olds in their school (or town) know how to register to vote, find their polling place and vote on Election Day.
- Tell them to be creative in putting together their instructions. (It can be a handout, a laminated card, a blog entry, a video, etc.)
- Direct them to their state's Secretary of State Web site (http://nass.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=33&Itemid=187) or to the MTV Rock the Vote Web site (<http://www.rockthevote.com/home.html>) to get registration information.
- When students have completed this assignment, ask the following questions:
 - What information appears in their instructions?
 - How did they format this information?
 - What are some of the best ways to teach young voters "how" to register and vote?
 - After completing this exercise, do they still have questions about how to vote?
 - How can they find answers to these questions?

Internet Resources

National Association of Secretaries of State (Elections and Voting)

http://nass.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=33&Itemid=187

This site offers links to election information in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Rock the Vote

<http://www.rockthevote.com/electioncenter/>

Students can find their polling place, register to vote, and learn about the election at this site.

New Voters Project

<http://www.newvotersproject.org/home>

The New Voters Project is a nonpartisan effort to register young people and get them to the polls on Election Day. "Voting Info" offers links to state election offices and polling places, as well as insights about youth voting.

Related Lesson Plans on PBS Site

NOW -- Voting

<http://www.pbs.org/now/classroom/democracy.html>

NewsHour Extra -- Bringing Out the Vote

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/socialstudies/Vote2004/bovote.html>

The Vice Presidency

The vice presidential nominations have received unprecedented attention in campaign 2008. Invite students to research the vice presidency.

- First, direct them to the United States Senate Web site to learn more about the history and responsibilities of vice presidents in the United States (http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Vice_President.htm).
- Then, have a class discussion.
 - What does the vice president do?
 - How many vice presidents have gone on to become president?
- Later, in small groups or as a class, read the campaign biographies of Gov. Sarah Palin (<http://www.johnmccain.com/about/governorpalin.htm>) and Sen. Joe Biden (http://www.barackobama.com/learn/meet_joe.php).
 - What strengths do these politicians bring to the McCain and Obama campaigns?
 - What are some reasons why these politicians have received so much media attention?

Internet Resources

Vice President of the United States Richard B. Cheney

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/vicepresident/>

Gov. Sarah Palin

<http://gov.state.ak.us/>

Sen. Joe Biden

<http://biden.senate.gov/>

INTERNET RESOURCES

In addition to the Web resources included in the guide, students and their teachers might want to look further.

Media literacy note: As with all issues, especially those that are politically charged, students must learn to be savvy and discriminating readers. No Web site can provide all the information a student needs to know, and teachers should encourage students to "interrogate" Web sites even as they are reading. Guiding questions as they work through these activities should be: What did you learn from this source? What didn't you learn from this source? Who sponsors this source? What bias might the sponsor have?

The Choice 2008

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/choice2008/>

The companion Web site to the FRONTLINE report provides interviews with close advisers, friends, colleagues and political adversaries, glimpses of the defining moments of the candidates' lives, the attributes they bring to presidential leadership, and the opportunity to view the program online.

PBS Vote 2008

<http://www.pbs.org/vote2008/>

The PBS Vote 2008 Web site is a comprehensive resource that offers video, news and online tools from PBS national programs and local stations. Teachers and students can explore the election and related issues using a variety of lesson plans and Web-based tools and games.

Statistics on Voting and Voting Trends

U.S. Census: Voting and Registration

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html>

This U.S. Census Bureau link features data on voting and registration patterns from the 1998, 2000 and 2002 elections. It also offers historical data, tables presenting voting trends over time, and estimates and projections of the voting-age population from the Current Population Survey (CPS).

Federal Election Commission

<http://www.fec.gov/index.shtml>

The Federal Election Commission hosts a site that offers information on recent election results, voter registration and turnout statistics, historical data, the Electoral College, the U.S. federal election system, and the administrative structure of U.S. elections.

USAGov -- For Citizens: Voting and Elections

<http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Voting.shtml>

USAGov.gov is an interagency initiative administered by the U.S. General Services Administration. The site presents information on the Electoral College, individual candidates, voting trends, and volunteering and contributions.

Campaign Speeches

American Rhetoric Online Speechbank

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speechbank.htm>

This site offers a directory of more than 5,000 speeches, interviews, debates and recorded media events. The links are arranged alphabetically by first name (use your browser's "Find" function to search for a specific speaker) and in two special collections: The Top 100 American Speeches and The Rhetoric of 9/11. Each entry notes whether the media is text or Real Audio (which can be either video or audio).

Presidential Rhetoric.com <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/>

"PresidentialRhetoric.com provides news, information and resources for those interested in studying the presidency from a rhetorical perspective. Focusing largely on contemporary presidential issues, PresidentialRhetoric.com assists researchers in locating recent information relating to American presidents, political communication, and rhetorical criticism."

Campaign Advertisements

The Living Room Candidate

<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/index.php>

This page hosts an archive of televised presidential campaign commercials dating from 1952 to the present.

Wisconsin Advertising Project

<http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu/>

The University of Wisconsin Advertising Project highlights where and on whom the campaigns are focusing in 2008. Since 1998, the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project has undertaken research initiatives to document how candidates, political parties and special interest groups communicate with voters.

Campaign Analysis

FactCheck.org

<http://www.factcheck.org/>

Factcheck.org is a nonpartisan, nonprofit project run out of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania that reviews the factual accuracy of the television ads, debate statements, speeches, interviews and news releases of the presidential candidates.