

The Point

Activities-based User Guide

**PRODUCED BY SILO CORPORATION IN CO-PRODUCTION
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THE POINT
ACTIVITY-BASED USER GUIDE

ATTENTION, TEACHERS! WE HAVE ASSIGNMENTS TO ACCOMPANY *THE POINT*.

The Point takes us into a couple of days in the lives of a group of urban youth. At breakneck speed, it draws us into their street-level perspective as they try to take their place in a complex neighbourhood where anything can happen.

Director Joshua Dorsey takes collaborative filmmaking to a new level. Non-actor teens didn't just perform their characters, they helped create them.

The following guide contains practical projects to help draw students into the drama and into the various aspects of filmmaking and storytelling.

Feel free to adapt these lessons to fit your class.

For more information, visit the Web site at <www.nfb.ca/thepoint>.

1. Who, What, Where, When and Why

Five Key Concepts of Media Literacy

1. Media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are produced within economic, social, political, historical and aesthetic contexts.
3. The meaning-making processes in message reception involve an interaction between the reader, the text and the culture.
4. Media have unique ‘languages,’ which characterize various forms, genres and symbol systems of communication.
5. Media representations play a role in our interpretation of reality.

The Point is a reality-based drama. The film grew out of improvisation and is performed by non-actors. First, the director and the producer sent out an invitation to community centres, schools and organizations that deal with at-risk youth in the inner-city neighbourhood of Point St. Charles in Montreal. Forty-five young people responded and participated in workshops that led to the creation of the film. After two months, 40 participants remained, all appearing on screen. The young people provided the raw material that they themselves perform.

Your Assignment – A News Article about a Media Product

Review the Five Key Concepts of Media Literacy above. Think of these concepts with reference to *The Point*—how it was made and the setting.

Now write a newspaper article about the film. Pretend you are a reporter for a local paper, and your town is about to undertake a similar project. You want to encourage the initiative. Your article must:

- Follow the conventions of a news article (headline, sub-headline, lead statement, by-line).
- Use the 5 Ws to describe the film: *who*, *what*, *where*, *when* and *why*.
- Include three “quotations” (you make them up!) that represent what the teen actors might say about their experience.

How to make your article newsworthy:

1. Start by answering the 5 W questions. Keep these in your rough notes for reference.
2. Come up with a lead to your story. A lead is a hook that grabs your readers’ attention and keeps them reading.
3. Most news stories are told in the inverted pyramid form. An inverted pyramid story begins with the most important news in the first paragraph and ends with the least important. Using the information from your 5 Ws, write a “nut” paragraph: it contains the important information and is the core of your story.
4. Elaborate on the story in the following paragraphs, including quotations from people involved.
5. Summarize the key information in your final paragraph. Leave the reader with something to think about.
6. Now it’s time to compose your headline. Use the present tense and active verbs, e.g., “Teens Tell Their Story in *The Point*.”

2. Good or Bad? Right or Wrong?

We gather information about characters in literature and film in several ways:

- By what they do and say.
- By what other characters say about them.

Since real life inspired this film, the characters we meet are complex, i.e., they are a mixture of “good” and “bad.” As we grow up, we come to realize that it’s more and more difficult to tell who is “right” and who is “wrong,” who is “good” and who is “bad.”

Consider the complexity of these characters: Oath, Julian, Jaa, Danny, Ashley, Sabrina and Michelle.

Your Assignment

Part A

1. Choose a character you think is the most complex.
2. Identify a scene that best illustrates the person’s complexity. In full sentences, explain how the scene reveals the following:
 - A change in the way we see the character. Do we see something we didn’t see before? A good side? Bad side?
 - How does the setting (where it takes place) reinforce the action?

Part B

1. Now think of some of your own experiences. What makes you a complex character? What themes emerge?
2. With a partner, brainstorm and improvise several scenes that experiment with a character you create. Decide on the person’s name, age, appearance, job (if any), relationships and body language.
3. Write a dramatic monologue. You may need to review some examples, such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot and “Porphyria’s Lover” or “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning. Your monologue must have stage directions, a setting and an implied audience.

A Note to Teachers about Some of the Main Characters

Oath

He professes to have truly loved Kyra. Dead people are often romanticized and idealized, however, as Kyra is. There are scenes when we discover that Oath was not as loyal to Kyra as he claims. At the picnic table, for example, Sabrina reveals to Chanel the true nature of Oath's relationship with Kyra. Later, Jaa confronts Oath on the basketball court about the tears Kyra shed over him.

- Oath is also a “good” guy who tries to tell the police about the danger Julian is in.
- Oath admits to Jaa that he enjoys hanging out with the “nerds” because he can make them do anything. At the pet shop, Oath convinces John to put the garbage can through the window in a bid to rescue the rats.
- Moments later, Howard and the gang arrive looking for Julian, and Oath reveals his heroism when he stops the gang from harming Satchel.

Julian

Although he is dealing drugs, Julian still comes across as a sympathetic character. We admire his bravado and studied cool. It is clear that anyone who is selling drugs at his tender age is a victim of circumstance.

- The scene when he is being threatened with a gun by Howard shows his courage.
- When Julian has been short-changed by the customer, he calls in the “thugs.” Julian waits outside the apartment building and watches their arrival with a smug smile.
- The scene of Julian's escape from the thugs through the back alleys and yards is heart-stopping. We admire his physical agility. Also, the setting of Point St. Charles underlines his circumstances.

Ashley

Her alienation and sadness are palpable. The scene in her apartment involving the confrontation with her mother reveals much about her character and her mother's inability to understand her daughter's need for trust.

- When Ashley beats up Julian, the train is hurtling by in the background, drowning out the sounds of the beating and underscoring the strength of her fury as she reacts to the feelings of worthlessness heaped upon her over the last few hours. She's not going to take it anymore, and the audience actually sympathizes with her reaction to her victimhood, as we do with the victim of the beating.

Jaa

This character shines throughout the film. The audience is somewhat disappointed, however, when he caves into peer pressure and smokes marijuana. There is a further let-down when he fails to show up for the basketball game and his friends lose the court.

- Jaa is a redemptive force, moving through the film and providing the audience with hope for the future. The scene at the beginning of the film when the youth worker congratulates Jaa on his grades is powerful. Jaa seems almost embarrassed about his achievement.
- He stops John from putting the garbage can through the window.

Danny

He is disturbed by the testimony he delivered the previous year. Under pressure from the police, Danny testified that he saw the man at 11:30, when it was really 11:05. Danny seems like a good person. He and his friends have a nice bond and give the lost girl directions. And yet, Danny is responsible for the conviction of an innocent man. This is further complicated when the convicted “pedophile” is murdered in jail. What can Danny do to redeem himself?

Sabrina

She initially comes across as a cold and calculating bully. Recall the scene where she orders the large Pepsi at Stephanie’s work place and proceeds to calmly remove the lid before tossing it in Stephanie’s face. We do however, come to see her in a different light.

- Her devotion to Kyra is touching. “We have to do it for Kyra” is her mantra in her mission to create graffiti memorials to her deceased friend. Bravely, Sabrina leads her team into the condemned building late at night and stands at perilous heights to execute her mission.
- During the picnic table scene, Sabrina admits to Chantel and the other girls present that she is only harassing Stephanie for fun and that her boyfriend broke up with her.
- When Sabrina discovers what Stephanie has done to her mural for Kyra, her indignation is righteous. Note that in the ugly physical confrontation that ensues, a train passes, drowning out the sounds of the struggle and intensifying the confusion.

Michelle

Her confrontation with her father and his girlfriend is fraught with emotion. The intense moment makes the audience pity her; at the same time, we feel uncomfortable, as though we are watching a scene of domestic violence that we should not be privy to.

Encourage students to isolate moments of the film and study what they reveal. Ask the class to reflect on memorable moments in their own lives, on life-changing events as inspiration.

3. “To Snitch or not to Snitch...”

Read these definitions of the word “rat” (noun):

1. Any of several long-tailed rodents of the family *Muridae*, of the genus *Rattus* and related genera, distinguished from the mouse by being larger.
2. A person who abandons or betrays his or her party or associates, esp. in a time of trouble. An informer.

According to an online dictionary of word origins, the second definition stems from a belief that rats leave a ship about to sink or a house about to fall, and led to rat meaning traitor, informant.
© 2001 Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*

In *The Point*, there are moments when characters are encouraged to rat or snitch to the authorities. “Telling” or “not telling” feature prominently in the story. Remember that the screenplay was co-written by the teen actors based on their own lives.

Assignment #1

Write a short scene revolving around a moment where a character in the film chooses to tell or not to tell. This is a conversation that doesn’t take place, but that you think should have. Think like a filmmaker!

Your scene must have at least two characters and a setting. Study the following example, and notice the use of italics and notes in parentheses.

The police are driving up to Kyra’s building. Julian stands in the shadows at the entrance. A train rumbles by, drowning out all sound, including the conversation of the officers. Julian approaches the police car, looking around nervously and biting his lower lip.

Officer Martin: *(approaching Julian)* Listen, kid, you’re not supposed to be here. This building is slated for demolition and you’re trespassing!

Julian: *(puts his hands up)* I’m in big trouble, man. I need your help. You’ve got to listen to me! *(He is abruptly cut off by the second officer.)*

Other Officer: *(reaching into his belt to retrieve his note pad)* Hey, isn’t that the kid who was trying to get into the car yesterday?

Officer Martin: *(nodding)* That’s him, all right.

Julian: I need police protection or something, man! I am not trespassing, I’m hiding, f*%@ing hiding and running for my f*%@ing life! *(Julian starts to point at the bruises on his face.)* Look at me! I’m – *(Officer Martin cuts Julian off)*

Officer Martin: *(sarcastically)* What happened, kid? You fell off your bike?! *(shouting)* I’m going to write you a ticket for trespassing and maybe when your parents have to pay a fine you’ll learn to stay out of this building! *(Julian sees the gansters’ car drive by and he runs.)*

Assignment #2

In writing, reflect on the idea of the “rat” or “snitch,” both in the film and in real life. Have you ever had to report something and chosen not to? Have you ever had to “tell on” somebody? Do you think the characters in the film made the right choices? What would you have done differently? Describe at least two personal experiences, and make two specific references to the film.

A Note to Teachers

There are many scenes that involve moments of “telling.”

1) When someone tries to tell the authorities something but the adults don't believe them:

- Johnny tries to tell the police he saw a ghost. They try to charge him with trespassing.
- Outside the pet shop, a young girl standing outside while Satchel sweeps tells the police that

Julian is a drug dealer. They dismiss her.

- Oath tries to tell the police that Julian is in danger. They don't believe him.
- Danny served as a witness in court and is responsible for the incarceration of a man who is subsequently murdered in jail. Under pressure from the police, Danny lies about the time he saw the man. It is later discovered that the man was not the killer.

2) When someone is being pressured to “snitch”:

- Howard wants Satchel to tell him where Julian is.

3) When someone knows something but is choosing not to tell:

- Julian doesn't tell the truth about who robbed him.
- Satchel doesn't tell his boss the real reason why he needs the money.
- Tanya tells her friends she is pregnant. She has not yet told Shaun.
- Jaa knows the truth about Oath's relationship with Kyra. He doesn't tell anyone, but he does confront Oath.
- Stephanie doesn't report that Sabrina is bullying her.
- Sarah and her friends from her old neighbourhood see Sabrina write “slut” on Stephanie's door.
- Oath, Shaun and the other guys find the marijuana and cellphone at the bus stop. Rather than report this to the police, they keep the marijuana and smoke it.

4) When someone does communicate something:

- Sabrina admits to her friends that her boyfriend has dumped her and that she is just torturing Stephanie for fun.
- When Michelle expresses her outrage at her father's new partner for keeping him away from her.

4. What If You Could Make a Film?

Think about the young people who helped create *The Point*. What did they want to communicate about their world?

Your Assignment – Writing a Pitch

Imagine an invitation arrived at your school. You and your classmates are invited to participate in a project like *The Point*, where a filmmaker wants you to help write a film about your community. You must write a “pitch,” or proposal, to the producers of the film. Write in full sentences and paragraphs and address the following:

Who you are: Age, affiliations, identity, goals

Your Audience: What age / social group would be your target audience? *The Point* is geared to Grade 9–12 students. Would your film be suitable for students? Would it be informative for adults? Remember, you must market your film, which means to convince people to buy it. How would you do this?

Where you live and how that setting will play a role in the film:

Think of how important Point St. Charles is as a backdrop in *The Point*). What landmarks in your community would you show again and again (i.e. in *The Point* the train rumbles by at crucial moments; the graffiti and abandoned buildings are profound characters in their own right). What would you want the world to know about where you live and the people who make it what it is?

Your Back Story: In *The Point*, the back story is the disappearance of Kyra. Her ghost is a silent witness who appears at critical moments in the story. She ties the various plot lines together. Think about your community and actual events when creating a back story. It’s always best to write about what you know.

Vignettes: *The Point* is a collage of various vignettes that focus on a particular character. Take, for example, the moment when Chelsea’s father comes to drop off a child support cheque. This vignette provides us with insight into this character and her interior struggles and motivations. What “little portraits,” or vignettes, would you show?

Soundtrack: What kind of music would best underscore your story? Would you use a variety of different musical genres?

Write one draft and read it over carefully. Revise until you have a final draft.