



# The Elephant Queen

## VIEWING GUIDE

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## teaching the film

**The Elephant Queen** is a documentary film following a herd of African elephants in Kenya, led by one matriarch, over the course of a year. A class screening of this film may complement a curriculum in environmental science, especially wildlife, conservation, and biomes/habitats.

Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will encourage students to think about the importance of animals and nature, and preserving our natural world.

**Grades 3 - 6**

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of *The Elephant Queen*. Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercises, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

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All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFILM Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

More info at [sffilm.org/education](http://sffilm.org/education)



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# about the film

**Directed by Mark Deeble and Victoria Stone**  
**(United Kingdom/Kenya 2018) English, 96 min**

**[theelephantqueen.com](http://theelephantqueen.com)**

When a long drought disrupts the Tsavo Region's fragile ecosystem, a herd of elephants is forced to make a perilous migration to seek a sustainable water source. Their stirring adventure begins as the herd's powerful leader, 50-year-old matriarch Athena, takes dramatic action to ensure the future of her cohort. Living and filming in Kenya for over four years, directors Stone and Deeble

achieve a level of breathtaking intimacy with their subjects, placing the audience directly into the heart of this family of gentle giants.

"Deeble, the credited cinematographer, gets spectacularly intimate and beautiful shots of the elephants and their animal friends. The film is at its best when it lays out the entire ecosystem species by species, each relying on the other in a delicate chain of life, death, verdancy, and sustenance." – Scott Tobias, Variety

# subject areas

**Biomes/Habitats**

**Endangered species**

**Environmental Science**

**Geography**

**Life Cycles**

**Wildlife Conservation**

**World/Current Affairs**

**Zoology**

# connect online

Untamed Science: Biomes of the World  
**[bit.ly/2KpXune](http://bit.ly/2KpXune)**

Elephant facts and resources  
**[elephants.com/resources](http://elephants.com/resources)**

10 Elephant Facts from National Geographic  
**[bit.ly/2Gdyewe](http://bit.ly/2Gdyewe)**

WWF Endangered Species  
**[bit.ly/2D6ZbQh](http://bit.ly/2D6ZbQh)**

Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee  
**[elephants.com](http://elephants.com)**

# discussion questions

## pre-viewing topics and discussion

This film takes place on the savanna in Kenya. To contextualize the film, teach students about the geography and wildlife of Kenya (see connect online section). It will also help to understand what a drought is.

## elephant facts that may add a deeper appreciation of the film:

1. What are tusks and how do the elephants use them?

- Tusks are incisor teeth and are used as weapons and for digging and moving objects.

2. What do elephants eat?

- Elephants are herbivores. They eat only vegetation - never meat.

3. How many species of elephants are there?

- There are 3 species of elephants:

- The African bush elephant
- The African forest elephant

- The Asian elephant. This film is about a herd of African bush elephants.

4. What elephants make up a “herd”?

- A herd of elephants consists of female elephants, called “cows,” and their calves. The oldest cow is the leader of the herd. She is called a matriarch or “queen” (matriarch is a female who rules a family or group). In the film, Athena is the Elephant Queen, after whom the film is named.

There are several scenes depicting or referring to the deaths of characters, which some students will find sad and upsetting. It may be helpful to prepare students for this by talking about the circle of life.

## explore kenya:

As a class, discuss what students imagine Kenya to be like. Then research and report back about what they learned about the geography and wildlife of the country. [bit.ly/2QRR4fU](https://bit.ly/2QRR4fU)

## activity: write an essay

Elephants are a “keystone” species, which means that they play a unique and crucial role in their ecosystem, and hundreds of other species depend on them for survival.

Write an essay that answers the following questions about elephants and their impact on their ecosystems.

- What other creatures depended on the elephants in film, and how did they depend on them?
- If elephants were to become extinct, what would happen to each of these other species?
- In what ways would their existence be changed? Do you think they would be able to continue to survive? Why or why not?



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# discussion questions

## character and story

1. The film begins with a storm, and after that the action takes place around the watering hole (until the water dries up).

- Besides the elephants, what other animals live near the watering hole?
- What was your favorite animal?
- In what ways do these animals depend on the elephants?

2. When the watering hole starts to dry up, Athena knows she needs to lead the herd to the refuge where there is water, but she keeps delaying the trip.

- Why does she delay the journey?
- Was it a good decision? Why or why not?

3. Mimi does not survive the journey to the refuge.

- What were the hints (called “foreshadowing”) early on that she would not make it?
- How do the elephants react when she dies?

3. Some scientists believe elephants have emotions similar to humans.

- What evidence from the film supports this belief?

## context

1. Although it is normal to have a dry season in Kenya where the water dries up, in this film there was also a drought.

- What is a drought and what causes them?

- How does human behavior make droughts worse?
- How do global warming and climate change impact droughts?
- What can be done to prevent droughts?

2. There were no humans shown in the film, but we learn in the end credits that Satao, the huge “tusker” Athena and her family met at the refuge, was killed by poachers. Poachers are people who illegally kill wild animals. Poachers kill elephants for their long tusks, which are called ivory. Ivory can be sold for lots of money because it is beautiful and rare. People use ivory to make jewelry and other objects.

- Should selling ivory be legal? Why or why not?
- If people didn't want to buy ivory, there would be no reason to kill elephants for their tusks.
- What would you say to someone to convince them not to buy ivory?

## kids against animal poaching

explore how young people can get involved to end animal poaching

[kidsaap.org](http://kidsaap.org)

## activity: elephant research

Learn More About Elephants: Elephants are a model animal for the study of science, social studies, and conservation problem-solving.

Ask students to brainstorm a list of things they already know about elephants. All ideas are good! Don't worry about inaccurate responses - students will learn the correct answers in the lessons. List all ideas on chart paper for future reference.

Next, ask students to brainstorm questions they have about elephants. What would they like to learn? Record answers on chart paper and refer back to the list as questions are answered.

Based on student interest, choose lessons from The International Elephant Foundation Curriculum. [elephantconservation.org/resources/teacher-resources](http://elephantconservation.org/resources/teacher-resources)

Topics include elephant characteristics, habitat, family life, socialization, and survival needs, as well as human interaction, tusks/ivory, poaching, and how students can help save the elephants.

# discussion questions

## style and message

The word **anthropomorphize** means to talk about an animal as if it had human characteristics and emotions.

- What are some of the examples of this from the film?
- Why do you think the filmmakers anthropomorphize the elephants and other animals?
- What purpose does it serve?

2. Music and sound effects are used in almost every scene throughout the film.

- Can you give some examples of this?
- What is the purpose of using music and sound effects?
- Is it effective? Did you like it? Why or why not?

3. At the very end of the film, we learn that this elephant herd has gone missing and that African elephants are in danger of becoming extinct.

- Why do you think the filmmakers wait until the end of the film to share this with the audience?
- Do you agree with their decision to keep these sad and disturbing facts out of the story?

4. When scientists or filmmakers study or film animals in the wild, they never interfere or help the animals because they don't want their presence or actions to change what would happen naturally.

- What do you think it would be like to make a nature documentary when you are not allowed to help or interfere with anything you see happening?
- How do you think the filmmakers felt when filming Mimi's death or the drought?

## watch and react:

in this video, an elephant approaches a vehicle. watch the clip and have students respond with how they would react in this situation.

[wwf.to/2G3i6MF](http://wwf.to/2G3i6MF)

## activity: write to congress

In 2011 Congress created a stamp known as the "Tiger Stamp" which raised money to help endangered species. The stamp has expired, but legislation has been introduced to extend the Save Vanishing Species Stamp for four more years.

Find out more at the World Wildlife Fund's petition page:

[bit.ly/2D1b4y2](http://bit.ly/2D1b4y2)

You can sign their petition or use the information provided to write your own letter to Congress.

The current administration is threatening to severely cut money from programs which help protect endangered species in the 2020 budget. Urge your senators to fund these crucial international conservation programs.

Write a letter to your representative:

[bit.ly/2UyE4kA](http://bit.ly/2UyE4kA)



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# california media literacy standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3 Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.2 Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.7 Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. [http://frankwbaker.com/state\\_lit.htm](http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

# common core standards

Grade 4: Standard 1.10 Evaluate the role of media in focusing attention on events and in forming opinions on issues.

Grade 5: Standard 1.8 Analyze media as sources for information, entertainment, persuasion, interpretation of events, and transmission of culture.

# media literacy resources: screening with meaning

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive. Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best

be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

## common core standards

### MEDIUM

All Media Is Constructed.

- What is the message, how is it delivered and in what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements comprise the media content?
- What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?

### CONTENT

Media Is A Language For Information.

- What is the subject of the media message?
- What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
- What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?
- To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

### PURPOSE

All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

- Why was the message constructed?
- Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
- To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
- What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?

### AUTHOR

All Media Is Constructed by Someone.

- Who is delivering the message?
- Who originally constructed the message?
- What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?

### AUDIENCE

All Media Messages Reach an Audience.

- Who receives the message?
- For whom is the message intended?
- What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

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# what is a documentary?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth.

The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

## a brief timeline of the documentary

**1895** The Lumiere brothers develop the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief unedited clips of life around them called 'actualities.'

**1900-1920** Travelogue or 'scenic' films become popular showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

**1926** Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With A Movie Camera*.

**1939** John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in the support of war.

**1960s** The 'cinema vérité' movement began in Europe, followed by the 'direct cinema' in the US. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

**1968** The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos*, opened the door to activist cinema of the 1970s, using film as a tool to counter capitalist politics in Latin America.

**1988** Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

**2000s** The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium more affordable to independent filmmakers. The term 'documentary' comes to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema.