BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

The Posters

Identify the actors & the film producer?
What do you think the film is about?
When do you think the film was produced?
The Title: *Mr Smith goes to Washington*

What does the name Smith imply? = it’s an ordinary, common family name / surname

*(Smith* is a family name originating in England. It is the most prevalent surname in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States → John Smith in *Pocohontas*, and is particularly prevalent among those of English, Scottish and Irish descent. It is also a common surname among African Americans, which can be attributed to black slaves being forced to adopt the name during slavery and never changing the name upon the end of the era of slavery → Will Smith)*

What do you know about Washington?

Capital of the USA (full name Washington DC = District of Columbia), named after the nation’s first President, George Washington.
It is also one of the 50 American states on the west coast of America.

Do you know the names of any important monuments?

The White House = home of the American President
The Capitol = where the US Congress convenes (the north wing houses the Senate Chamber - each state has two senators; the south wing is home to the House of Representatives – the number of representatives that each state sends to Congress depends on its size)
The Lincoln Memorial = it was built to honour Abraham Lincoln

Do you know the names of any American Presidents?

Expect: Obama, Bush, Kennedy, Washington
(ask them who is on the dollar bills: $1 = George Washington, $2 = Thomas Jefferson, $5 = Abraham Lincoln, $10 = Alexander Hamilton, $20 = Andrew Jackson, $50 = Ulysses Grant, $100 = Benjamin Franklin – not a President …)

Why do you think Mr Smith goes to Washinton?

**Historical context**

The 1930s was a tumultuous time for the United States and for democracy as well. The Great Depression (after the Wall Street Crash of 1929) had forced millions into poverty in both the USA and in Europe and in turn induced major changes in the political structure of many European countries. Communism and fascism were on the rise and becoming a serious threat to democracy as both an institution and an idea. Clashes between these different ideologies eventually lead to the outbreak of World War II in 1939. However, a few months short of the outbreak of war, Frank Capra’s *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* was released and provided a sense of hope in regard to the past, present and future of the United States and the ideologies for which it stood.
**Characters and plot summary**

**Jefferson (Jeff) Smith** (James Stewart) is a likeable, innocent and idealistic young man who is well known in his state for promoting boys’ summer camps. He is chosen by the Governor to become a Senator after the state’s senior Senator dies. His first name is also the surname of America’s third president.

**Senator Joe Paine** (Claude Rains) is the other Senator from Jeff’s state who has been in the US Senate for the last 20 years, and who, despite his good reputation and decent intentions, is generally controlled by corrupt political forces.

**Clarissa Saunders** (Jean Arthur) is a sweet and very smart secretary in Senator Paine’s office who tries to help Jeff get used to political life after he arrives in Washington, and who later helps him expose the horrible corruption in his state.

**Jim Taylor** (Edward Arnold) is a very rich, powerful and corrupt businessman who runs a horrible “political machine,” through which he controls most of the politicians and many of the newspapers and other big businesses in his state.

**Governor “Happy” Hopper** (Guy Kibbee) is a weak and pitiful politician who is completely controlled by Taylor, who must appoint one of his state’s two Senators after one of them dies.

**Diz Moore** (Thomas Mitchell) is a cynical Washington reporter who wants to marry Clarissa Saunders.

**President of the Senate** (Harry Carey) is a fair-minded Senator who controls how things are run in the Senate.

This film is considered one of the true classics in the history of American movies. It is the story of Jefferson Smith, an idealistic young man from an unnamed Western state who is a local hero for having organized various boys’ camps while helping run the “Boy Rangers.” The Rangers are an educational, outdoors and sports organization that is similar to the Boy Scouts of today (A “ranger” takes care of large forests and parks, and a “scout” is a person sent to obtain information, who is often in the military).

After one of his state’s two Senators dies, Jeff is appointed to be the temporary replacement Senator by the state’s Governor. Soon, Jeff takes off for Washington in the company of the state’s other Senator, Joe Paine, who is a hero of Jeff’s and was a friend of his father. Jeff has high hopes, and is just grateful to be able to serve in the city he associates with the democratic ideals of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Yet soon after arriving, Jeff quickly realizes that Washington is a mean-spirited and often corrupt town, and that in fact, Senator Paine is one of the most corrupt people there. After trying to write a law that would set aside some land at Willet Creek for a national boy’s camp, Jeff accidentally discovers that this land has been secretly bought by Taylor and his political machine. He does this so that he can make a huge amount of money when he sells the land to the state after convincing it to build a dam there. Yet rather than stay quiet, Jeff decides to fight both Senator Paine and Taylor in order to save the land for his camp and to expose the horrible corruption of his state’s politicians. Soon, the entire Taylor machine sets out to destroy Jeff and his reputation, but with the help of Clarissa Saunders, Jeff fights back against long odds. He does so in order to save both his own reputation and to live up to the original ideals of American democracy.

**Questions to answer while watching the film**

1. What reasons do the Governor’s children give as to why they want their father to pick Mr. Smith as the new senator? (He is a hero to the boys; he knows about Washington and Jefferson, and how to put out a forest fire)
2. What gift do the Boy Rangers give Mr. Smith at his party? (A briefcase)

3. While Mr. Smith is on the train talking with Senator Paine, how do they say Mr. Smith’s father died? (He is shot; he was killed while helping a miner)

4. What does Mr. Smith say he would like to do on the morning before he goes to the Senate for the first time? (Go to Mt. Vernon- George Washington’s home)

5. When the newspaper reporters interview Mr. Smith, what does he tell them he would like to do for the country? (Build a national boy’s camp in his home state)

6. Why is Mr. Smith angry and punching all of the newspaper reporters? (They wrote articles that made him look foolish)

7. What is Miss Saunders’ first name? (Clarissa)

8. Why is Willet Creek important to Mr. Smith? Why is it important to Jim Taylor and Senator Paine? (Smith wants to build his boys camp there. Paine and Taylor have bought all the land around Willet Creek and are going to sell it back to the government. Paine introduced a bill into the Senate asking for the government to build a dam on Willet Creek)

9. Why does Susan Paine keep Mr. Smith away from the Senate? (So he won’t hear the bill read that deals with Willet Creek dam)

10. How does Mr. Smith find out about the Willet Creek Dam Project? Ms. Saunders tells him.

11. What does Senator Paine accuse Mr. Smith of doing? (He accuses Smith of owning the land around Willet Creek and trying to sell it back to the government, and stealing money from kids. Essentially they accuse Smith of what they were doing)

12. After the Senate committee hearing, where does Mr. Smith go? Who finds him? What do they decide to do? (He goes to the Lincoln Memorial. Saunders finds him. They decide to fight back and clear his name)

13. When Mr. Smith returns to the Senate and takes the floor to speak, what does he do to prove that he is innocent? (He starts a filibuster = a very long speech)

14. How do the children help Mr. Smith? (Print a newspaper trying to give Smith’s side. They protest against what Taylor is saying about Smith)

15. In the end, what happens to Senator Paine? (He confesses and then tries to kill himself – we hear the gun shot)

16. What qualities of good citizenship does Mr. Smith demonstrate?

17. What did you learn about the legislative process and how a bill becomes a law from watching the movie? (We learn how to introduce a bill and the steps of how a bill becomes a law and what a filibuster is)
AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

Here are some examples of activities depending on the level of the students:

• What are the themes of the film?

  - High ideals
  - Patriotism
  - Fighting for what is right (against impossible odds) – the truth prevails
  - The American Dream
  - Corruption
  - Media manipulation
  - Government manipulation

• Class discussion: (choose from some of the following questions)

  1. What is this film trying to say about American democracy?
  2. Over 60 years later, is corruption in government as big a problem as it seems to have been back then? What about in your country?
  3. Do similar things happen today that are not called corruption because they’re perfectly legal?
  4. How is this film reflective of the situation America found itself in back in the late 1930s?
  5. How would you describe Jeff? Are there lots of naïve and idealistic people like him around today?
  6. Is patriotism a good thing?
  7. Is Joe Paine a fundamentally bad person, or just weak?
  8. Would Jeff and Clarissa make a good couple?
  9. What did you like and not like about this movie?

• Write a film review (see handout)

• Watch an excerpt: When Mr Smith arrives in Washington

  1) Show the students the extract. Get them to note down key words. See if they recognize any of the sights and know anything about the famous people mentioned.
  2) Get them to analyse the different camera shots in the scene.

Beforehand give them the handout (camera shots and angles)
The scene:

On his whirlwind sightseeing bus tour of the capital city's sites and monuments Smith gazes at the words "EQUAL JUSTICE" carved on the Supreme Court Building, he sees the White House and Constitution & Pennsylvania Avenues. He is then swept up in the glories of the nation's capital - inside the Capitol Building he stands in awe before a statue of Thomas Jefferson - author of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. As a gigantic Liberty Bell clangs, more montage images are super-imposed in close-up - the penned words "Life, Liberty" and "Pursuit of Happiness," flames of freedom and statues of the founding figures of Samuel Adams and Alexander Hamilton. Smith also contemplates the Washington Monument pointing up into the sky. More images follow: a bust of George Washington, a bald eagle, a War Memorial, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The camera circles around the Lincoln Memorial. Smith walks up to view the imposing seated statue of a solemn-faced Lincoln in front of him, reading the inscribed words of Lincoln's most famous speeches. In a memorable sequence, he overhears a young grandson (assisted by his grandfather) reading out loud part of the Gettysburg Address from the inscription. Smith reverently views the touching scene with patriotic pride. An elderly black man with his hat against his chest also looks up reverently.

Historical landmarks:

George Washington (1732-1799) was America’s first President

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was America’s third President drafted the Declaration of Independence

Declaration of Independence 4th July 1776. The thirteen British colonies on the eastern seaboard declared their independence from Britain and gave birth to the new American nation. The most famous phrase from that declaration is:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”


The Bald Eagle is on the American Coat of Arms and is also the Great Seal of the USA

The Star Spangled Banner is the name of the American national anthem but also of its flag (other names: the Stars and Stripes or Old Glory)

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) was America’s 16th President. He announced the Emancipation Declaration freeing the slaves in 1863. He was assassinated by a pro-slave southerner.

In his Gettysburg address Lincoln redefined the Civil War (1861-1865) as a struggle not just for the Union of the American states, but also for the principle of human equality. The war was between the northern states, which were industrialized and against slavery and the southern confederate states that supported slavery because they relied on slaves to work on the plantation

NB Context in 1939: There was still segregation in the southern states = a far cry from ‘life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness’
Camera Shots

A **camera shot** is the amount of space that is seen in one shot or frame. Camera shots are used to demonstrate different aspects of a film's setting, characters and themes. As a result, camera shots are very important in shaping meaning in a film.

An **extreme long shot** contains a large amount of landscape. It is often used at the beginning of a scene or a film to establish general *location* (setting). This is also known as an establishing shot.

A **long shot** contains landscape but gives the viewer a more specific idea of setting. A long shot may show the viewers the building where the action will take place.

A **full shot** contains a complete view of the *characters*. From this shot, viewers can take in the costumes of characters and may also help to demonstrate the relationships between characters.

A **mid shot** contains the characters or a *character from the waist up*. From this shot, viewers can see the characters' faces more clearly as well as their interaction with other characters. This is also known as a social shot.

A **close-up** contains just *one character's face*. This enables viewers to understand the actor's emotions and also allows them to feel empathy for the character. This is also known as a personal shot.

An **extreme close-up** contains *one part of a character's face* or other object. This technique is quite common in horror films, particularly the example above. This type of shot creates an intense mood and provides interaction between the audience and the viewer.

Camera angles

It is important that you do not confuse camera angles and camera shots. Camera shots are used to demonstrate different aspects of setting, themes and characters. Camera angles are used to position the viewer so that they can understand the relationships between the characters. These are very important for shaping meaning in film as well as in other visual texts.

A **bird's eye angle** is an angle that looks *directly down upon a scene*. This angle is often used as an establishing angle, along with an extreme long shot, to establish setting.

A **high angle** is a camera angle that looks *down upon a subject*. A character shot with a high angle will look vulnerable or small. These angles are often used to demonstrate to the audience a perspective of a particular character. The example above demonstrates to us the perspective or point of view of a vampire. As a viewer we can understand that the vampire feels powerful.

An **eye-level angle** puts the audience on *an equal footing with the character/s*. This is the most commonly used angle in most films as it allows the viewers to feel comfortable with the characters.

A **low angle** is a camera angle that looks *up at a character*. This is the opposite of a high angle and makes a character look more powerful. This can make the audience feel vulnerable and small by looking up at the character. This can help the responder feel empathy if they are viewing the frame from another character's point of view.

As with camera shots; you will be able to see many examples of camera angles in any film or visual text that you view. The next time that you watch television or see a film, take note of the camera angles and think of how they affect your perception (idea) of different characters.
How to write a film review

As with any kind of writing, you need to start by identifying your genre, purpose, audience and style.

The first step is to get familiar with the genre (or form), so if you are planning to write a film review, start by reading some published film reviews. You can find film reviews on the BBC website, listed according to film genre.

Notice what each review is doing and ask yourself what is the purpose of each review?

A film review should have a number of purposes:

- **To inform.** The review needs to tell people who is in the film, who it was produced by and where or when readers can see it.

- **To describe.** The review should describe the story, characters and some of the action - without spoiling the plot or giving too much away!

- **To analyse.** A good review gives an opinion on whether the film is good or not and why.

- **To advise.** Finally, the review should tell the reader whether or not to go and see the film. These different purposes will give you a basic structure for your writing.