



MOUNTAINFILM
FOR STUDENTS

THE MAGIC OF CHESS

DIRECTOR Jenny Schweitzer Bell
DURATION 5 min

Every year, the next generation of chess masters meet at the National Elementary Chess Championship. In the ensuing games, kids learn not only the elements of the game but speak of bravery, belief in oneself and the importance of opening moves. They may not always win, but in this short film, the magic of the game is seen through youthful eyes brimming with possibility.



Standards

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR READING

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1 / Key Ideas and Details

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.8 / Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9 / Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10 / Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR SPEAKING & LISTENING

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1 / Comprehension and Collaboration

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 / Comprehension and Collaboration

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3 / Comprehension and Collaboration

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4 / Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Key Vocabulary chess, elementary, national, game, strategy, tournament

Filmmaker Interview



JENNY SCHWEITZER BELL

Why did you become a filmmaker and how did you get started?

I was always an artist. You would usually find me painting or drawing in my early years. At 13, my father gave me his old 35mm Minolta and I focused on portrait photography, trying to imitate the work of Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus, and Sally Mann. After high school, I went on to the Rhode Island School of Design, where freshman take foundation courses in all forms of painting, drawing, and 3D design. It was there that I fully realized my passion for story, so it was a natural gravitation to pull the worlds of image making and storytelling together. It was after being so affected by Steve James' documentary, *Hoop Dreams* that I declared filmmaking as my major.

When you made the film, did you have a specific audience in mind?

From the start, I aimed for the film to appeal to a universal audience. I knew that from an adult perspective, it would be difficult to not fall for these adorable young players. And from a child's perspective, it was my hope that they would be inspired to play seeing how much chess has enhanced the lives of the subjects in the film.

When editing the film, was there anything you wished you could have included in the final cut?

It's hard to imagine, but for *The Magic of Chess* I shot nine hours of interview footage! I believe my first rough cut was 60 minutes in length. From there, it's all

“It was a natural gravitation to pull the worlds of image making and storytelling together.”

about the elimination of material that doesn't serve the narrative. For this kind of film, all the subjects' lines need to be in unison. The goal is to have many people serving as one voice. So, as I whittled down the edits it's always very sad for me to see some clips or subjects have to go. I also captured a b-roll moment of a tearful young boy, maybe six years old, who was incredibly shaken and sad after losing a game. I felt that shot really captured how meaningful this competitive game is to these kids. I had to cut it because in the end, I thought it would maybe send the wrong message in the context of the piece.

What are some of the challenges you encountered while making this film?

I directed, shot and produced the film. I had one assistant. I knew that I would need to capture an enormous amount of material to make the film work, including interviews and the b-roll. The tournament is scheduled over three days and your working between the timing of the chess rounds, so I had to be on point to capture all of the elements going into the edit. Because this was a scheduled, on-location event, I knew there would be no going back for pickup shots. I had to know exactly what imagery was needed going into the shoot and then frantically capture it all in three days.

Is there an action you hope people are inspired to take after seeing this film?

My objective was primarily to showcase how deep passion and some hard focus in an activity can truly enhance one's life. And this isn't necessarily about your game strength. Having a rating system, a child is able to see themselves improve over the years. Ultimately,

you are competing with yourself. The film's objective was to portray that when getting involved so deeply with this activity, certain life skills, such as perseverance, learning to lose, focusing ability, are developed.

What's the next big adventure or film project on the horizon for you?

I'm currently at work on a short documentary portraying a nursing home's experience through the early days of the COVID outbreak. I'm also prepping a feature film that will address the gender gap in all competitive mind sports — such as chess, Scrabble, and Poker. When you look at the top 100 players in any of these sports you'll find very few women. The film will take a deep dive look at all the reasons why this phenomenon remains.

What is one piece of advice you can give students that you wish someone had shared with you?

When I was graduating from film school I thought that I basically had one shot to becoming a director. However, at the age of 21, I realized that trying to make it as a director wasn't realistic. Who was going to pay me to be a director? I set out on a 15 year journey working in production on narrative feature films. I had many roles on these projects, from coordinating to line producing and producing. I never dreamed that I would have the opportunity to direct my own projects. Looking back, I realize that all those early career roles were critical stepping stones to my work today. I know now that I would never have had the knowledge base to direct had I not been involved in all the minutiae that goes into filmmaking. All of those skills I garnered in my 20s and early 30s have served each project I direct now.

Pre-Screening Activities

Pre-Screening Activity 1

Prior to watching the film, ask the class if they have heard of the game of chess and if anyone has ever played it. This could be a simple warm-up activity, where you could pose the question and have the class give a “thumbs up” as a response, to determine your class’s baseline level of knowledge about chess. Then, ask the students what types of games they like to play, whether it be soccer, Go Fish, lacrosse, checkers, Old Maid, etc.

If you are working with your students remotely, you could make this a fun game on Zoom, by setting a timer for 1–2 minutes, and having the students physically grab the game to show the class.

Example: A student would hold up the board game they like to play, or a lacrosse ball to show/explain to the class what they like to play.

This could also be turned into a memory warm-up game, where the student has to remember the name of the student in front of them and the game they like to play. Then when introducing themselves, they would have to say the name of the people in front of him and the game they like to play.

Example:

“Charlie likes Go Fish, Diego likes Old Maid, Lila like lacrosse,
and I like _____ .”

Discussion Guide

GENERAL/OPEN PROMPTS

1. After watching *The Magic of Chess*, what are some things you learned about chess? Did you know that it was a popular game and there were national and international tournaments?

EXPLORING SELF

1. Why do you think the kids interviewed in *The Magic of Chess* say that learning chess was intimidating? After learning more about chess, how do you feel about learning chess?
2. In the film, students talk about strategies to help them cope with being nervous (wiggling toes) and not getting upset when losing (taking deep breaths, playing calmly, crying). What are some strategies you use to help you when you feel upset or nervous? Have you ever lost a game? How did you handle it?
3. In the film, the students rave of the benefits of learning how to play chess (how to make a plan, how to make mistakes, improving concentration, “brain skills to help me with other things in my life!”). Can you think of a game you play that helps you with other skills in life? What skills has that game taught you? Why do you think games help you with other things (besides the game)?

EXPLORING THE WORLD

1. Chess has applied to be an Olympic sport, more than once. They were denied from the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. Do you think chess should be an Olympic sport? Why or why not?
2. Chess is popular around the world. Do you think that it should be mandatory to learn in school, like a foreign-language and math?

EXPLORING FILMMAKING

1. Jenny Schweitzer Bell chose to interview only kids in her film. Why do you think she chose to do this? What message do you think she was trying to communicate with her audience and viewers?
2. Did *The Magic of Chess* make you want to learn the game of chess? Why or why not?
3. The last scene of the film shows a young boy holding a trophy that is taller than him. Why do you think Jenny Schweitzer chose to end the film with that image?

EXPLORING SOCIAL ISSUES

1. The filmmaker, Jenny Schweitzer Bell, chose to make the documentary about the 2019 Elementary Chess Championship in Nashville, Tennessee. The same festival happens every year, and 2020's has been postponed to December due to COVID. Do you predict the Elementary Chess Championships will be able to take place this year? How would the documentary look different, if every student were to play online vs. in an in-person tournament? Do you think playing chess online would give access to more students than playing in an in-person tournament? Why or why not?
2. In 2019, eight-year-old Tani Adewumi became New York State's chess champion. At the time he was living in a homeless shelter as a Nigerian refugee with his family. [Here is a short video from CBS News](#) (2:55). Tani learned chess in just one year, and wants to become the best Grand Master in the world. How do you think Tani was able to manage the stress of escaping religious persecution, moving to a new country, and living in a homeless shelter to become a skilled chess player?

SENSE OF WONDER

1. In 1997, IBM programmed a computer called Deep Blue to play chess. Deep Blue won against the world chess champion at the time in a six game match. Since 1997, more chess robots and computer programs have been developed to play chess. Do you think it is fair to play against a computer? Why or why not? Do you think that chess should be played with a computer or in-person? Why or why not?

Activities

Activity 1: Grades K–6

The filmmaker Jenny Schweitzer is an avid chess player. She **wrote an article** and filmed a short video (3:38) for the *New Yorker* which focuses on girls' experiences playing chess, with interviews from an all-girl chess tournament. As a mother of two girls who both play chess, she watched them become discouraged after dealing with gender-specific bullying in a male-dominated setting. In the article, Schweitzer states:

“At the elementary-school level, there’s just one girl to every four boys playing tournament chess. By the time kids have reached their senior year in high school, that disparity has increased to ten boys to every girl.”

Reviewing the short text (three paragraphs, grades 6–7 reading level) will be more appropriate for the older grades, but the video is suitable for all. If showing just the video to the younger grades, include the quote (above) about gender disparities.

You could visually represent this by counting how many people are in the class, and saying that only X amount of students are allowed to play chess, based upon the ratio of 1:4 in elementary grades, 1:10 in high school.

Example: In a class of 20 students, only five are allowed to play chess.



Ask students the following questions:

- **Why do they think there is a gender disparity in the game of chess?**
- **How do you feel about this gender disparity?**
- **For K–2: Is it fair that there are more boys playing chess than girls?**
- **What are some ways that chess could become a welcoming place for all genders and gender identities?**

Activities

Activity 2: Grades 3–6

Using Newsela.com (create a free login using Google Drive or using your school's email address), search for the article "[Cook County Jail detainees took on inmates around the world in online chess tournament.](#)" You can change the Lexile score to be more appropriate for the grade level you are working with (560 Lexile is the lowest level, which correlates to middle of 2nd grade).

Depending upon time-constraints and your students' ability levels, you could read the article as a group, in small groups, or individually. You could complete this task by assigning a jigsaw – where small groups are assigned a paragraph/section, and they are responsible for summarizing what the paragraph/section says to report to the whole class.

This thought-provoking article discusses how inmates at Cook County Jail in Chicago are learning chess and are playing in online tournaments with other inmates around the world. The article cites a study in Brazil that found that "chess-playing prisoners were less likely than others to return to incarceration." Some questions you could ask your students are:

- **How do you think chess benefits people who are currently serving time for a crime they committed?**
- **Why do you think learning chess would help them to make better decisions after being released from prison?**
- **One inmate, who was interviewed for the article, states "It's not everyday you get to represent your country," referring to playing against other inmates from Brazil and Russia. Do you think inmates benefit from playing chess against other inmates around the world?**
- **Do you think someone who has been convicted of murder should have the right to play against other inmates?**

These questions are meant to be thought-provoking and to engage students thinking on multiple levels. Responses to these questions could be written, or part of a small group or whole class discussion.

Students could record their responses using [FlipGrid](#) (a free online tool for teachers where you can create a class and have students post video recordings, up to 5 minutes, in response to this prompt).

If you are physically in a classroom, you could have students argue their thinking, and designate opposite sides of the classroom as agree or disagree. A student would then be responsible for stating their opinion in response to the question/discussion and stand on the continuum where their opinion lies. After a student is able to articulate their point, other students in the class would either agree or disagree, or maybe somewhat disagree by standing in the middle.

Activity 3: Grades K–6

There are a ton of resources to learn chess online. If your class feels inspired, [ChessKid.com](#) is a free tool for students and educators. As a teacher, you can manage a class and they have free lessons for teachers for how to teach chess.

RECOMMENDED EXTENTIONS

Form a chess club! Here are ChessKid.com's recommendations for [How to Start A Chess Club: Make it Fun](#)

Make a chess board out of [recycled plastic bottles](#) and have the class bring in recycled water bottles to contribute. It is somewhat involved to make all of the pieces, but it could be a great upcycled craft.

Here is inspiration to [make a chess set out of pasta](#). This step-by-step guide from Handmade Charlotte looks less involved, although adult supervision with younger students is recommended. It could be a station in a class rotation in your classroom, while some students are playing chess on ChessKid, other kids are playing chess with a classroom volunteer, or they are simply drawing/tracing chess pieces.

Royal Baloo has a free printable for [teaching kindergarteners chess](#), including rules and easy to read graphics that are developmentally appropriate for up to 3rd grade.

[Alex and the Wednesday Chess Club](#) (3.5 stars on Goodreads.com) by Janet Wong is a 40-page picture book, about a boy named Alex who learns to play chess at a young age. He loves playing chess until he loses to a relative and decides to give it up forever. However, as he gets older, Alex decides to give chess another try. It is about him overcoming his fear of losing in the game of chess.

In 2019, Tanitoluwa Adewumi [won the 2019 New York State Chess Championship](#) (2:55) after learning it in a year, all while living as a homeless Nigerian refugee. Tani has recently published two books, and a picture book is expected to come out in November of 2020 about his incredible story. [My Name is Tani and I Believe in Miracles](#) (Young Readers edition and 4 stars on Goodreads.com) is a memoir told from Tani and his parent's perspectives. Thomas and Nelson, the publishers, have a [free bundle](#) where you can download a discussion guide, two posters, and a chapter from the book.

REFERENCES

Chess for Kids - Episode 1: Getting to Know the Game, Kids Academy, 10 May 2018, Chess for Kids - Episode 1: Getting to Know the Game.

"Chess Pack." Royal Baloo, royalbaloo.com/chess-pack/.

Doggers, Peter. "Chess Put Forward To Join Paris 2024 Olympic Games." Chess.com, Chess.com, 13 Feb. 2019, www.chess.com/news/view/chess-put-forward-to-join-paris-2024-olympic-games.

Faucett, Rachel. "DIY Painted Pasta Chess Set." Handmade Charlotte, 20 Dec. 2018, www.handmadecharlotte.com/diy-painted-pasta-chess-set/.

Gendler, Alex, director. A Brief History of Chess, TED-Ed, 12 Sept. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeB-1F-UKO0.

Homeless 3rd Grader Aims to Become Youngest Chess Grandmaster, CBS This Morning , 18 Mar. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsvRMIhdug.

Keilman, John. "Cook County Jail Detainees Took on Inmates around the World in Online Chess Tournament." Newsela, Chicago Tribune, 25 Aug. 2019, newsela.com/read/inmates-online-chess/id/55291/?search_id=cc416469-b9be-49e9-bccc-13f419d63d52.

Lucker, Thomas. "How To Start A Chess Club: Make It Fun." ChessKid.com, ChessKid.com, 10 May 2015, www.chesskid.com/article/view/how-to-start-a-chess-club---part-5.

Plastic Bottle Art and Craft: DIY Chess out of Plastic Bottles , Art and Craft, 25 Sept. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_vMomd2ZJo.

Schweitzer, Jenny. "The Girls Fighting Stereotypes in the World of Scholastic Chess." The New Yorker, The New Yorker, 17 June 2019, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-girls-fighting-stereotypes-in-the-world-of-scholastic-chess.

Secrets of the Chessboard: Episode 4, Kids Academy , 17 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=45&v=LnaDpC5tMxg&feature=emb_title.