

2001: A Space Odyssey—A Study Guide
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Background

While teaching middle school (7th and 8th grade) Science in the 1980s, I conducted a week-long lesson with the 1968 movie, 2001: A Space Odyssey.

I varied student activity, switching between viewing portions of the film and working on a study guide. The study guide's purpose was not to test their knowledge; it was a hands-on means to involve them more closely with the film. To receive course credit for that week, students simply had to fill in answers I gave them for the study guide, and watch the film.

That week-long project was successful. The students were engaged by the film, telling me the study guide enabled them to understand the story.

Some peer teachers told me that a unit on 2001 was expecting too much from 7th and 8th graders. I wonder what they would have thought of the following.

In 2023, I conducted a 3-session course on 2001 with two students. The two boys were age 6 and 7.

Sessions 1 and 2 were spent alternately watching sections of 2001 and doing the study guide. I emphasized that students now understood the film better than most adults would, on seeing it once. I explained my goal for Session 3: that I, students, and at least one parent view the film, *with the students explaining the film to the parent*.

Was this successful? My answer is based on:

- The eager anticipation students had for Session 3;
- The explanations students had (sometimes with my prompting) (but, hey, that's one thing teachers *ought* to do, right?) of things they had learned in Sessions 1 and 2;
- The pleasure and satisfaction the parent later expressed with the experience.

In other words, yes, *it was successful!*

Why 2001?

Some movies have great themes, such as: Do not compromise your principles, despite pressure from your friends.

2001 has no such theme. (With the exception of the first item under "Discussion.")

The story of 2001 was developed collaboratively between filmmaker Stanley Kubrick and writer/scientist Arthur C. Clarke. I do not care for Clarke's view of humanity, which seems to be collectivist (as opposed to individualist). For example, in his novel, *Childhood's End*, (spoiler alert) "childhood" consists of humanity existing as individual units; the end of childhood, or maturity, takes place when all individuals fuse into one new entity.

So what is the value of 2001?

I have successfully used the film as a springboard to introduce many scientific concepts. The film's visual brilliance can ignite the student's excitement and enthusiasm for these topics.

The study guide is solidly packed with examples.

Course Requirements

Not surprisingly, you'll need a copy of the film, 2001: A Space Odyssey.

You'll see possible benefits of other materials (lunar maps, globes, posters, online videos, etc.) as you review this study guide, depending on your own preferences, situation, age and interest of your students, etc.

One thing is not optional: a *thorough* familiarity with the film. *You* need to know more about the film than your students do.

When asked how many times I've seen 2001, at some point, I replied that I'd lost count sometime after about the 30th time.

For better or worse, that is not an exaggeration made in jest. Even worse (or better?), it's been at least two or three decades since I started saying that.

Brief Synopsis of 2001

The main story of 2001 is not complicated. But director Stanley Kubrick deliberately composed the film in such a way that the viewer has to piece the story elements together, like a puzzle, to grasp the film's integrated structure.

It could be argued that the viewer gets the most satisfaction from integrating this story on his own. I believe that's possible, if the viewer patiently watches the film enough times, and does just a little thinking. Not thinking on a genius level; just modest, every-day, average-person level thinking. (Which is much, *much* more thinking than most films ask of a viewer.)

Synopsis of the film:

Four million years ago, aliens visit Earth. They find a species verging on extinction.

The aliens decide, "These creatures have potential. Let's advance them along a little; help them survive in the short range, so that they might advance in the long range."

The aliens decide, "Let's set an alarm on the moon. If they're smart enough to reach the moon and find the alarm, we'll know they've advanced enough for the next step."

Four million years later, "that species" (mankind) discovers the "alarm."

Discovery of the "alarm" sets off a signal aimed at Jupiter.

A ship is sent to Jupiter, to see where the signal was sent.

At Jupiter, aliens show one man many wonders of the universe.

The aliens look the man over and decide, "Let's advance this guy along a little."

(Alien thoughts translated into English from their native language.)

After the Movie: Possible Activities / Discussions

- Why did HAL go crazy? It took me years before I understood this, but as soon as I did, it seemed ridiculously obvious. It is explained in the second book/movie, 2010: Odyssey Two/The Year We Make Contact (the book and movie bear different titles).

My own philosophical outlook is Objectivism, the philosophy developed by Ayn Rand. I will address this question, in the context of that philosophy, as I understand both.

HAL was programmed to tell the truth.

HAL was also programmed to hide part of the truth (the nature of the Discovery's mission).

This sets up a contradiction within HAL's thinking.

A contradiction is anti-reality.

To hold a contradiction will be destructive to a consciousness' ability to function, to the degree that the contradiction is 1) accepted; 2) put into practice. Some people seem able to function fairly successfully in life, and still hold an anti-reality contradiction in their minds. But that's only when they compartmentalize, and keep that contradiction isolated from the rest of their thoughts and deeds.

This is obviously an important, extensive subject. But even a child can understand (if not be convinced) that dishonesty is harmful to one's ability to think clearly. A good possible way to present this is to tell the child, "Don't believe this just because I say so. In your years ahead, watch what happens to dishonest people, and see if you think this is true."

- At the end of 2001, Dave is transformed into what some people call the "star child." Unfortunately, the star child's image is used on the front of many home video boxes for 2001; it is also used as the menu's image on the DVD/blu-ray. In my opinion, that spoils the impact of seeing the star child for the first time. When showing the film to my students and their parent, I made every effort to hide box covers and menu images. It wasn't always easy.

- The film can introduce students to classical music. Hum The Blue Danube Waltz or Daisy Bell slowly, emphasizing the beats. See if students can detect how many beats it has in its pattern (measure). Define a waltz. Play a non-waltz (music the student is already familiar with, if possible) to differentiate.

- There is a technical error when the Aries spacecraft lands on the moon. Dust is shown swirling, which would only happen with an atmosphere present. When I pointed this out, my 7-year-old student came up with several imaginative methods to accurately photograph that part of the movie.

- The craters Clavius and Tycho are mentioned in the film. Find these on a lunar map. (Perhaps have them "discover" these names before they are mentioned in the movie.)

- Find a movie with a scene in an airplane or submarine, where the control room is in red light. Show just that scene and ask students if they notice anything in common with 2001. (Use of red light to better adjust one's eyes to the outside darkness.)

- There are numerous plastic assembly models and "action figures" related to 2001.

- Arthur C. Clarke wrote the novel version of 2001. (Reading the book will vastly increase one's ability to understand the movie.) Clarke also wrote three sequels. Despite my earlier expressed opinion of Clarke, I recommend the four books, which are:

2001: A Space Odyssey (the story of the 1968 film this project is based on).

2010: Odyssey Two (made into a film in 1984). Dave returns, and HAL is fixed.

2061: Odyssey Three.

3001: The Final Odyssey. In this story, Frank is found and revived. (A lot of medical progress can take place in a thousand years!)

- There are many books on the making of 2001. Some truly excellent ones are published by Taschen, but they can be very pricey. One large, square book from Taschen, about the size of a vinyl LP, not only has great photos and info on the movie; it includes a DVD of the movie, and a large, folded movie poster with art by Robert McCall.

- Illustrator Robert McCall created artwork for this film. Introduce students to his other work.

- The aliens are never shown in the film. (Unless you consider the monolith to actually *be*

the aliens! Now *that's* an interesting thought!) Some “making of” books show ideas Kubrick had along these lines. Do students think it was more effective not to show the aliens?

Locating and Using the Files

2001_Project_Student_Edition.pdf

The student’s study guide.

https://silentreels.com/wp-content/uploads/simple-file-list/2001/2001_Project_Student_Edition.pdf

2001_Project_Instructor_Edition.pdf

The instructor’s guide, with answers in red lettering.

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2001_Project_InDesign.indd

The Adobe InDesign file used to create the above two files. Use this if you are able to use Adobe InDesign, and want to customize the Project.

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Make this Project Your Own

- If you are an InDesign user, you can change the heading “The 2001 Project” to something personal for the students. For the lesson with the two boys, I used an initial for each boy.
- Don’t forget the two words in “study guide.” First, there is “study.” The intent is to actually learn something. Then, there is “guide.” Do not be afraid to modify what you read here, for your own use. A “guide” is just a *guide*.