

PIKE RIVER EDUCATION RESOURCE

ENGLISH + MEDIA STUDIES

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES | YEARS 10–13

Find more information, downloads, and material at
[HTTPS://WWW.MADMAN.CO.NZ/PIKE-RIVER/EDUCATIONAL-RESOURCE-KIT/](https://www.madman.co.nz/pike-river/educational-resource-kit/)



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“STORIES LIKE PIKE RIVER MATTER BECAUSE THEY PUSH US TO LOOK CLOSELY AT POWER, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE REAL IMPACT OF SYSTEMIC FAILURE. FOR ME, STORYTELLING IS A WAY TO CONFRONT UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS, AMPLIFY VOICES WE DON'T USUALLY HEAR, AND HELP US QUESTION THE WORLD WE'RE LIVING IN.”

ROBERT SARKIES | DIRECTOR

CLOSE VIEWING & NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

OBJECTIVE

Analyse cinematic storytelling techniques and their impact, and explore how film communicates emotion, narrative, and truth.

DESCRIPTION

Rewatch carefully selected scenes from *Pike River* (e.g., the opening sequence, Anna and Sonya at the fence, the courtroom scene, the families hear the news). As you watch, consider how Robert and his team use film craft to bring this story — grounded in real events — to life.

OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION

Camera angles and framing — notice how Robert as director positions the audience, what is shown or hidden, and how this shapes empathy for characters. Pay attention to close-ups, wide shots, and perspectives that reveal tension, vulnerability, or isolation.

Lighting — explore contrasts between the dark, confined spaces of the mine and the open daylight above ground. How do shadows, colour tones, or brightness influence mood and audience perception?

Sound and score — listen to ambient noises, echoes, and Karl Sölve Steven's musical scoring. How does sound heighten tension, foreshadow events, or convey the emotional world of the characters?

Editing and pacing — consider how cuts, scene transitions, and temporal shifts affect rhythm, suspense, or emotional impact, particularly in trial and family scenes.

Emotional resonance — discuss how these techniques together create a sense of realism, empathy, and narrative immersion, allowing the audience to feel the weight of events without explicit exposition.

Encourage students to explore how cinematic craft communicates both factual grounding and emotional truth, and reflecting on the responsibility of storytelling when dealing with real-life tragedies.

TASK

Write a 500–700 word response analysing how one specific cinematic technique in a chosen scene shapes meaning and guides audience emotion. Use concrete examples from camera work, lighting, sound, or editing to support your ideas.

OUTCOME

Students will develop —

Critical visual literacy skills and the ability to interpret film as a complex storytelling medium.

An understanding of how emotion, narrative, and cinematic craft intertwine.

Awareness of ethical storytelling and the impact of creative choices on audience perception.

DOCUMENTARY VS. DRAMA COMPARISON

OBJECTIVE

Explore how different media forms frame real events, and examine the choices that shape audience perception and empathy.

DESCRIPTION

Compare RNZ news footage covering the Pike River disaster with selected dramatised scenes from ***Pike River*** (e.g., miners entering the mine, families waiting at the fence, key courtroom moments). Observe how the story changes depending on medium, focus, and narrative technique.

ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

Tone and emotional impact — notice how factual reporting differs from cinematic storytelling in creating tension, empathy, or urgency.

Language and framing — examine narration, dialogue, and commentary choices; how do journalists and filmmakers shape understanding?

Visual composition and pacing — how do shot choices, editing, and scene sequencing influence what audiences feel or focus on?

What is gained or lost in dramatisation — consider the benefits of emotional engagement versus the risks of embellishment or simplification.

Ethical considerations — discuss privacy, sensitivity to survivors and families, and the responsibilities of media and filmmakers in portraying real events.

Guide discussion by prompting students to think critically about the power of storytelling and the line between factual accuracy and narrative immersion.

TASKS

- Create a comparative chart highlighting differences in tone, language, framing, and emotional effect between documentary footage and dramatised scenes.
- Write a short reflective response discussing the impact of these differences on audience understanding and empathy.
- Produce a podcast episode debating ‘Which tells the truth more effectively — documentary or drama?’, incorporating examples from both sources.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Develop media literacy and critical thinking skills.

Evaluate how narrative and form choices shape understanding and emotional engagement.

Explore ethical storytelling and the responsibilities of representing real-life events.

CREATIVE REIMAGINING

OBJECTIVE

Encourage narrative writing, perspective-taking, and ethical reflection.

DESCRIPTION

Students choose a real event from the Pike River timeline or an alternate real-life event and expand on this through written exploration.

ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

Perspective and voice — write from the point of view of a miner, family member, journalist, or official. How does their experience shape their emotions and choices?

Tone and style — consider how writing style (diary, poem, scene) conveys urgency, grief, hope, or resilience.

Ethical responsibility — reflect on representing real people and events respectfully. What details can be included to maintain authenticity without causing harm?

Emotional engagement — explore how language and narrative structure can evoke empathy and understanding in the audience.

Encourage students to consider historical accuracy alongside imaginative interpretation, supporting reflection on both story craft and the responsibilities of representation.

TASKS

- Watch the interview clips with screenwriter Fiona Samuel and director Robert Sarkies, who worked in close collaboration across the script for *Pike River*.
- Create a scene (or more), diary entry, or poem, inspired by a chosen Pike River event, or alternate real-life event.
- Share work in small groups, highlighting emotional resonance and the ethical choices made in storytelling.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Develop narrative writing skills.

Deepen empathy and ethical reflection.

Explore how fictionalised storytelling can illuminate lived experience and help audiences engage with historical events.



COMPARATIVE STUDY MODULE

OBJECTIVE

Examine how narrative and cinematic framing shape understanding of real events across different films.

Prompt discussion on how creative choices influence historical memory and how ethical storytelling decisions are made when representing real tragedies.

DESCRIPTION

Students compare *Pike River* with *Out of the Blue*, analysing how each film approaches storytelling around real-life tragedy.

EXPLORATION

Directorial choices — how Robert's approach in *Pike River* (e.g., focus on Anna and Sonya's friendship, miners' perspectives, soundscape) differs from the narrative strategies in *Out of the Blue*.

Pacing and structure — how scene order, flashbacks, or temporal focus affect tension and audience engagement.

Character focus — whose story is central, and how that shapes empathy and understanding.

Emotional tone — how cinematography, music, and performance evoke feelings of grief, hope, or reflection.

Perspective and cultural context — how Aotearoa New Zealand's social, historical, and ethical context informs each film.

Audience interpretation — consider how viewers' perceptions of truth and responsibility are shaped differently by each cinematic approach.

TASKS

- Produce a comparative essay or presentation reflecting on how narrative, cinematic, and ethical choices shape audience understanding.
- Include examples from both films, referencing specific scenes, performances, and directorial decisions.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Develop critical thinking and analytical skills.

Gain historical analysis through film.

Build awareness of media influence on collective memory and how storytelling shapes cultural understanding.



ACTOR REFLECTIONS ON PORTRAYING REAL LIVES

OBJECTIVE

Explore performance challenges and ethical responsibility when portraying real people.

DESCRIPTION

Students watch edited interviews (in the aligned folder) with **Pike River** actors, where performers reflect on embodying miners, families, and officials.

ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

Preparation and research — how actors approached learning about real individuals, including reading testimony, observing mannerisms, or consulting families.

Emotional challenges — managing grief, tension, and ethical responsibility when performing scenes depicting trauma.

Authenticity vs. interpretation — decisions around conveying realism while respecting privacy and sensitivity.

Empathy in performance — understanding the lived experience of real people and conveying it convincingly to audiences.

Collaborative storytelling — how actors, directors, and writers work together to balance truth, narrative clarity, and audience impact.

Encourage students to consider historical accuracy alongside imaginative interpretation, supporting reflection on both story craft and the responsibilities of representation.

PROMPTS

- How do actors navigate portraying real trauma without sensationalising it?
- What can we learn about empathy and ethical responsibility from their process?
- How does an actor's choice affect the audience's connection to the story?

TASKS

- Watch the interviews with Anna and Sonya, Melanie, and Robyn.
- Students write a reflective response connecting actor choices to the film's narrative, emotional impact, and ethical considerations.
- Encourage reference to specific scenes (e.g., the miners' last moments, family reactions at the fence) discussed in the interviews.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Gain insight into collaborative storytelling in film.

Develop understanding of the ethical dimensions of performance.

Build skills in critical reflection and media literacy through analysing both narrative and performance.

FILM REVIEW FOR PUBLICATION

OBJECTIVE

Develop analytical and persuasive writing skills.

DESCRIPTION

Write a professional-style review of **Pike River**. Before writing, sit with your thoughts and craft clear notes.

Analyse how cinematic techniques (camera angles, lighting, sound, editing) communicate story, emotion, and ethical context.

Balance critique with the cultural, historical, and social considerations of the Pike River tragedy.

Reflect on tone, audience engagement, and ethical sensitivity when reviewing dramatised real events.

Guide review shaping, prompting students to create a review that is insightful and engaging, encourages audiences to see the film, and maintains a spoiler-free approach while thoughtfully addressing the film's craft and ethical context.

STRUCTURE SUPPORT

Introduction — State the film, its context, and your overall impression without spoilers.

Context — Briefly acknowledge the historical and cultural significance of the film.

Cinematic Techniques — Comment on how camera, lighting, sound, and editing shape story and emotion.

Ethical Sensitivity — Reflect on how the film represents real people and balances truth with drama.

Audience Engagement — Highlight what makes the film compelling while encouraging viewers to see it.

Conclusion — Offer a concise, respectful, and final evaluation.

POST REVIEW TASKS

- Submit the review to a school magazine, blog, or digital platform such as Letterboxd.
- Optionally, pair with peer feedback or class discussion to refine analysis and perspective.
- Audio record a spoken word review.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Strengthen analytical writing, media literacy, and persuasive communication skills.

Learn to balance critical insight with ethical awareness when engaging with real-life inspired narratives.