



# FIFTIES

**A simulation of the events, personalities, lifestyles, and culture of the 1950s**

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Bill thanks John Bovberg, his team teaching partner, for hours of help in suggesting and pilot testing teaching strategies used in FIFTIES.

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# Introduction

## PURPOSE - 1

FIFTIES simulates life during one of America’s most misunderstood, yet fondly remembered, decades—the 1950s. Scholars and laymen since the Romans have written that we are all “products of the immediate past” and that “the past is prologue.” The decade of the 1950s is our recent past, and we of the present are indeed products in some way of those years. Many who remain detached from the nostalgia and trivia engendered by the revival of fads, songs, and clothes of the 1950s have suggested that there are so many personal viewpoints about the 1950s that it is difficult to sum up just what contributions to American history those years have made. To those who were teenagers then, the 1950s were exciting, golden years. They feel those times were filled with “happy people with happy problems.” They remember relatively peaceful years punctuated with rock ‘n’ roll, proms, angora sweaters, and chocolate Cokes. Others who were older and shouldered more responsibility remember the fifties as a decade of trouble and postponement of solutions to many problems. They point to weak political leadership, continued racial injustices, urban decay, Cold War flare-ups throughout the world, and the apotheosis of narrow-minded and dangerous right-wing personalities like Senator Joseph McCarthy, who used the issue of fear of communism to vault to national prominence.

Historian Daniel Boorstin, writing in *Newsweek* magazine (July 6, 1970), was early to advance the idea that to understand ourselves, we need to delve more into “the history of everyday life, of business and advertising and housing and eating and drinking and clothing.” What affects us, then, as Americans and as humans is far more than the outcome of a presidential election, a congressional bill, treaty agreements; or the findings of some governmental agency; or the Dow Jones averages on the Stock Exchange. Traditional history books and courses are replete with political events and dates. Perhaps our values and our patterns of adult behavior, our frame of reference, were fashioned more, as Boorstin suggests, by everyday things around us—television, peer group relationships, music, advertising, movies, pop heroes, language, food, fads, and the like.

With these thoughts in mind, especially the theory of studying *both* political *and* social history as influences on our lives, FIFTIES was developed to allow students to analyze major personalities, events, life-styles, culture, and youth of that time—an in-depth study of a decade which has been labeled *The Nifty Fifties*, *The Happy Days*, and *The Fabulous Fifties* as often as critics have judged the era *The Age of Apathy*, *The Age of the Great Postponement*, and *The Nightmare Decade*. Your students will assess the validity of these labels after being involved in the activities of FIFTIES.

## PURPOSE - 2

Specifically, students will experience the following:

### **Knowledge**

1. some of the major issues, trends, and events of the 1945-1960 years which have influenced us today
2. the personalities who have shaped both our attitudes and much of our cultural inheritance
3. why many people both revere and criticize the 1950s
4. two differing opinions on the merits and significance of the 1950s; and making a ledger sheet to display the two sides
5. the rudiments of debate as used in the unit-ending proposition on the merit and relevance of the 1950s as an historical topic
6. the basic working definitions of such words as “pop culture” by demonstrating knowledge of some of the best examples from movies, television, fads, and music records

### **Skills**

1. practicing successful group discussion skills
2. using memorabilia from the fifties to make generalizations
3. utilizing oral participation skills in front of small and large groups
4. participating as a debater or listener; sifting relevant from irrelevant arguments in a debate
5. writing scripts for and acting out some TV shows and a movie from the 1950s
6. writing “pop songs” as examples of music of the 1950s
7. writing Beatnik poetry, advertisements, and jokes dealing with topics from the 1950s
8. comparing and contrasting teenage slang and lifestyle of the 1950s with today’s
9. interviewing people and researching yearbooks from the 1950s and making generalizations and drawing conclusions
10. surveying people about conformity and drawing some conclusions about behavior

### **Feelings**

1. taking a side on the merits and relevance of the 1950s, while debating or writing an essay with facts to support the student’s position
2. sensing what it was like to be a teenager in the 1950s
3. being in a position of power whose very words of acceptance will earn a “song composer” a great deal of “money”
4. judging the pros and cons of the so-called cultural vacuum of the 1950s
5. taking a stand for or against Senator Joseph McCarthy’s actions during the 1950s
6. deciding whether or not today’s teenagers differ from teenagers of the 1950s in conforming to acceptable standards in thoughts and actions

# OVERVIEW - 1

This simulation enables students to work as teams, panels, and individuals while they learn the history and the “heartbeat” of the 1950s. The phases are broken down and separated to allow for teacher options, yet they are designed for continuity and comprehension. *The number of days in parentheses represent optimum length. Obviously the simulation can be shortened by deleting activities.*

## **Introductory Phase** (2 days)

Students read the Student Guide to begin the simulation and to be motivated to do high quality work on the activities which follow. An HISTORICAL BACKGROUND sheet with discussion questions lays the foundation for trends of the 1950s and gives students the historical prospective. Students are given Brownie Points and COLLECTING MEMORABILIA sheets, which are explained.



## **Phase 1: The Big Events** (4 days)

Forming groups of six students each, the class writes historical summaries in journalistic form to be pieced together in a classroom “newspaper.” Each group does two of the 12 events and orally presents its summaries before pasting its work on the class newspaper. Interwoven before, during, and after the lesson are historical news flashes, brief headlines covering the lighter side of the fifties’ history. The last activity for this phase is a document analysis of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s contribution to the era.

## **Phase 2: Lifestyle** (10 days)

Perhaps the real “meat” of FIFTIES is best expressed in the activities of this phase. An evaluation of a series of BIG EVENTS, in which students answer follow-up questions, is used as a springboard to following activities. In succession, students creatively rework dialogue for Peanuts cartoons, survey people on conformity, compose Beatnik poetry, write jokes as Shelley Berman or Mort Sahl might have done, draw doodles, and, as a finale to this phase, schedule an ideal family weekend in the fifties.

## **Phase 3: Mass Media Impact** (6 days)

In order to deal with cultural history, students are divided into Cultural Committees (by your dictation); they first write and then perform scenarios from some of the 1950s’ most popular TV shows: *What’s My Line?*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Dragnet*. One committee silently acts out one of the most influential movies of the decade, *Rebel Without a Cause*, starring James Dean, while a narrator dramatically tells the story of teenage growing problems in *Rebel* .... Another committee shares the responsibilities of composing pop tunes of the fifties and allows these to be judged by a Jukebox Jury (a panel of “celebrities” gives each tune either a “hit” or a “miss”).

# SETUP DIRECTIONS - 1

- Options** The author recognizes that the 1950s could be taught for varying lengths of time, using many techniques and emphases. FIFTIES provides many options. You can look over the many activities in FIFTIES and pick out what you feel is essential. You may wish to use the complete simulation with all of its activities, but if you decide to “pick and choose,” you can eliminate any phase and just about any activity from any phase. Perhaps Phase 1: The Big Events can be eliminated in favor of your own time-tested activities proven successful over the years. You can shorten Phase 3 significantly by cutting out all the Cultural Committee presentations except *Rebel Without a Cause*. Phase 4 can be eliminated if you feel you must emphasize traditional historical facts and concepts.
- Length** FIFTIES lasts 30 days or six weeks. You can shorten it, as mentioned above, by deleting some activities or by assigning more outside work. The author feels that using the entire simulation is time well spent and that each student will come away with an indelible learning experience. If you want to extend the simulation, you may want to use some audiovisual materials. See the Bibliography for ideas. Also, you could videotape some reruns of TV shows of the fifties (*Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, etc.) and use them as a basis for comparison with more recent TV versions.
- Grouping** Whenever you have to group your students, you should probably dictate who goes into which groups. Place one or two of your better students into each group; also try to keep boy-girl numbers equal in all groups.
- Duplication** The author suggests transparencies or class sets of materials rather than one copy per student if at all feasible. The outcome of the activity will not be seriously affected. The following materials need to be duplicated: T = overlay transparency; CS = class set; IC = individual copy
  - BROWNIE POINTS BALANCE SHEET (IC)
  - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (CS, IC)
  - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND QUIZ (CS, IC)
  - COLLECTING MEMORABILIA (CS, IC)
  - BIG EVENTS (CS)
  - NEWS FLASHES (CS—possibly several class sets)
  - SENATOR JOSEPH McCARTHY (CS, IC)
  - ANALYZING THE FIFTIES (CS, IC)
  - ANALYZING THE FIFTIES WORKSHEET (IC)
  - ADS AND COMMERCIALS (CS, IC)
  - CREATIVE CARTOONING (T, IC)
  - CONFORMITY SURVEY (C)
  - NONCONFORMISTS (CS, IC)
  - HUMOR (CS, IC, or can be read aloud)



*A graph comparing the two eras—language, dress, values, clothes, morals—could be useful.*

## SETUP DIRECTIONS - 2

- PLANNING AN IDEAL WEEKEND (CS)
  - MOVIES, TV, AND POP MUSIC (CS, IC)
  - CULTURAL COMMITTEE #1 (6-8 copies per class)
  - CULTURAL COMMITTEE #2 (4-6 copies per class)
  - CULTURAL COMMITTEE #3 (6-8 copies per class)
  - CULTURAL COMMITTEE #4 (6-8 copies per class)
  - CULTURAL COMMITTEE #5 (6-8 copies per class)
  - INTERVIEWING AND RESEARCH TASKS (IC)
  - TASK CARDS (1 set—cut apart and rubber band Socies/Kissies cards separate from Hoods/Weirdos cards)
  - FIFTIES DEBATE (6 copies)
  - LEDGER SHEET (6 copies—if you plan to give it to your debaters)
  - JUDGE'S EVALUATION FORM (CS)
  - FIFTIES FINAL EXAM (CS, IC)
  - PLANNING A NIFTY FIFTIES DANCE (optional)
5. **Research materials** No attempt is made here to present an exhaustive bibliography, although the author has done considerable research and reading. The works in the Bibliography are recommended for you and your students who want to read more on the subject and have the maturity to handle some adult material.
6. **Grades and Brownie Points** Hold your students accountable for a grade during the simulation by awarding grade points. (For all the work they do students earn “Brownie Points,” a phrase from the 1950s which meant doing good and earning praise like Brownies, the pre-Girl Scout set.) Students fill out their BROWNIE POINTS BALANCE SHEETS as the simulation progresses. At the end of the simulation you will pick up these balance sheets and curve their totals. You may want to require your students to staple all written evidence of their point totals in sequential order underneath their balance sheets.
7. **Memorabilia Day** This is worthwhile. Use it if possible. Set aside one day and have students tell about what they brought in. Use caution if you intend to leave the memorabilia on display in class over a few days. Much of what students bring in (see COLLECTING MEMORABILIA) is irreplaceable.
8. **Extra creative efforts** The author has learned while teaching with his very inventive team teaching partner, John Bovberg, that very often a particular activity succeeds due to those little “extras” a teacher does to motivate, excite, and arouse students to do their best. Therefore, consider doing the following:
- Whet student interest by using colored chalk announcements to promote interest in FIFTIES (e.g., Fifties is coming—so cool it! or James Dean says, “This class is full of cream puffs!” Fifties is coming ...)



*An artistic arrangement will enhance this activity.*

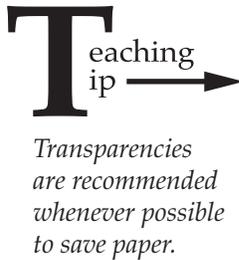
# UNIT TIME CHART

<p><b>Introductory phase</b></p> <p>Discuss student's knowledge of the 1950s</p> <p>Read Student Guide and HISTORICAL BACKGROUND</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>1</b></p>	<p>Quiz over HISTORICAL BACKGROUND</p> <p><i>Optional:</i> Hand out COLLECTING MEMORABILIA and discuss when Memorabilia Day will be held (Day 27?)</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>2</b></p>	<p><b>Phase 1</b></p> <p>Hand out BIG EVENTS</p> <p>Divide class into six groups</p> <p>Work on newspaper</p> <p>If you are using, hear NEWS FLASHES</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>3</b></p>	<p>NEWS FLASHES</p> <p>Work on polishing the 12 news stories</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>4</b></p>	<p>NEWS FLASHES</p> <p>Present 12 news stories</p> <p>BIG EVENTS newspaper completed and posted</p> <p>Award points</p> <p><i>Optional:</i> Oral quiz</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>5</b></p>
<p>Groups work on SENATOR JOSEPH McCARTHY</p> <p>Collect work at the end of the period</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>6</b></p>	<p><b>Phase 2</b></p> <p>Read ANALYZING THE FIFTIES WORKSHEET</p> <p>Begin ADS AND COMMERCIALS assignment in new groups</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>7</b></p>	<p>Go over answers to ANALYZING THE FIFTIES WORKSHEET</p> <p>Divide students into groups of three to four</p> <p>Read ADS AND COMMERCIALS handout; choose ads/commercials</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>8</b></p>	<p>Write, rewrite, and rehearse ads/commercials; due tomorrow</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>9</b></p>	<p>Groups present their ads/commercials</p> <p>Class members award Brownie Points</p> <p>Present CREATIVE CARTOONING assignment on <i>Peanuts</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>10</b></p>
<p>CONFORMITY SURVEY assignment discussed</p> <p>Work on CREATIVE CARTOONING assignment</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>11</b></p>	<p>Use opaque projector to present <i>Peanuts</i> cartoons</p> <p>Take home cartoons and award points</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>12</b></p>	<p>Hand out NONCONFORMISTS and/or HUMOR</p> <p>Give assignment(s) in above handouts</p> <p>If possible, present some Beatnik poetry and Mort Sahl humor</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>13</b></p>	<p>Go over CONFORMITY SURVEY</p> <p>Work on Beatnik poetry and/or fifties humor assignment</p> <p>Take home surveys and award points</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>14</b></p>	<p>Espresso coffee house?</p> <p>Beatnik poetry and fifties humor presented</p> <p>Take home poetry and humor assignments and award points</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>15</b></p>
<p><i>Optional:</i> Quiz over the first 15 days' work</p> <p>Divide class into "families" of four</p> <p>Use PLANNING AN IDEAL WEEKEND handout; take home assignment and award points</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>16</b></p>	<p><b>Phase 3</b></p> <p>Read MOVIES, TV, AND POP MUSIC</p> <p>Divide class into cultural committees and hand out appropriate assignments</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>17</b></p>	<p>Work day</p> <p><i>Optional:</i> Announce quiz tomorrow over MOVIES, TV, AND POP MUSIC handout</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>18</b></p>	<p><i>Optional:</i> Quiz over MOVIES, TV, AND POP MUSIC</p> <p>CULTURAL COMMITTEE #1 presents <i>What's My Line?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>19</b></p>	<p>CULTURAL COMMITTEE #2 presents <i>Dragnet</i></p> <p>CULTURAL COMMITTEE #3 presents <i>Ozzie and Harriet</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>20</b></p>
<p>CULTURAL COMMITTEE #4 presents <i>Rebel Without a Cause</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>21</b></p>	<p>CULTURAL COMMITTEE #5 presents <i>Juke Box Jury</i></p> <p>Hand out TEENAGERS as homework assignment</p> <p><i>Optional:</i> Announce quiz on the homework assignment for tomorrow</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>22</b></p>	<p><b>Phase 4</b></p> <p><i>Optional:</i> Quiz over TEENAGERS handout; discussion</p> <p><i>Optional:</i> Take pictures of students in 1950s attire</p> <p>Hand out and discuss INTERVIEWING AND RESEARCH TASKS</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>23</b></p>	<p>Organize debaters. Hand out FIFTIES DEBATE</p> <p>Divide rest of class into six groups (three Socies/Kissies and three Hoods/Weirdos; choose leaders)</p> <p>Assign TASK CARDS</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>24</b></p>	<p>TASK CARD assignments read within groups, then handed in</p> <p>Socies/Kissies become Hoods/Weirdos and vice versa</p> <p>New TEENAGE TASK CARDS assigned</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>25</b></p>
<p>TASK CARD assignments handed in, read within groups—most creative ones read to whole class</p> <p>Award points for TASK CARD assignment after evaluation overnight</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>26</b></p>	<p><i>Optional:</i> 1950s Memorabilia Day</p> <p>Go over results of INTERVIEWING AND RESEARCH TASKS assignment. Draw conclusions about teenage life during the 1950s</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>27</b></p>	<p>Debaters meet and prepare final strategy</p> <p>Hand out JUDGE'S EVALUATION FORM and prepare class for debate</p> <p>Hold debate</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>28</b></p>	<p><b>Phase 5</b></p> <p>Debate winner determined</p> <p>Discussion on the "bad" and "good" sides of the 1950s</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>29</b></p>	<p>FIFTIES FINAL EXAM</p> <p>Discuss possibility of Nifty Fifties Dance</p> <p>BROWNIE POINTS BALANCE SHEETS plus all evidence of unit work to be handed in tomorrow</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>30</b></p>

# DAILY DIRECTIONS - 1

The following time sequence is based on using all of the simulation phases and activities in a period of six weeks. (See #1-#2 under Setup Directions for comments regarding shortening the unit.)

## 3-5 days before the simulation



1. To motivate students, try preparing colorful chalkboard phrases and terms from the 1950s (e.g., “Fifties is coming, so cool it!” or “James Dean days.” “This class is a bunch of cream puffs—turkeys—creeps—yo-yos, etc.” “Fifties is coming!”)
2. Study the complete Teacher Guide and decide what changes you wish to make to adapt the simulation to your students’ needs. Allow three days or so to duplicate all Introductory Phase and Phase I materials.
3. Prepare a large, blank *Graffiti Board of the 1950s*, (a poster made from butcher paper). Most school activities offices can supply you with this. If not, go to the local butcher shop and ask for a generous slice of 8-10 feet. Then throughout the simulation have students write on this board, at the same time cautioning them about obscene or gutter language.

## Day 1

1. This is an important day because students will get the “feel” and overview of the simulation. Using the chalkboard, divide it into four sections: *Personalities*, *Events*, *Teenager Life*, and *Miscellaneous*. Either write down their responses yourself or have them compete in groups of three or four to see who can fill up their section first. This will allow you to see what they already know about the fifties and perhaps where they got their information (e.g., TV). Point out why most of the information is slanted toward happy or pleasant memories of the 1950s. In reality the decade was not all “fun and games.” Crises and fear were present, too.
2. Pass out the Student Guide and have students read silently or read aloud. (As a joke, you may have them fold their hands and sit up straight to simulate a classroom of the fifties.) Explain any vague parts or review some of the activities.
3. Hand out HISTORICAL BACKGROUND. Explain that the purpose is to gather some background of the fifties because so many trends started in this postwar period. Also explain that this first handout is political and serves as a foundation for the social/cultural experiences that follow. Explain that they will be quizzed tomorrow on this handout.

