MINISTRY OF STORIES

Inspired by... Monty Python's Flying Circus

COMEDY WRITING

∼ By Gem Carmella ∼

For Key Stages 2 & 3
Ages 9 - 14

- Intro to comedy writing
- Creating comic characters
- Analysing comedy sketches
- Writing a short sketch
- Creating silly worlds

MINISTRY OF STORIES

BBC

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Introduction

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Ministry of Stories teamed up with BBC History and comedy writer-performer Gem Carmella to help young people create new comedy sketches inspired by Monty Python's irreverent style.

This pack is for teachers and youth workers, to help you use *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and our young people's original comedy to inspire other young writers, and introduce them to comedy writing.

Watch the full set of comedy sketches by young writers from Swanlea School, aged 11 and 12.

Getting Started

We recommend leading these activities in a session of 1.5 – 2 hours, but they can be spread out.

You will need:

• General writing materials
• Worksheets (below) enough for one per student
• Post-its
• A board – to display key words and themes as they come up
• Audio-visual equipment

Activity 1.
WHAT MAKES YOU LAUGH?
10 minutes

Humour is extremely personal with no 'right' or 'wrong' elements, so it is important to make time to talk to your students about what makes them laugh. Examples could include...

Cartoons

Schadenfreude*

Books & Films

Games

YouTubers

*Deriving pleasure from other people's misfortune, like slipping on a banana skin!

Young people will get the most out of these activities if they are permitted to follow their own ideas of humour. At this stage, they shouldn't have to explain why they find something funny, just recognise it.

Now spot and draw attention to the trends you observe. You will see that most humour is achieved through schadenfreude, juxtaposition, conflict, repetition, exaggeration, surprise, and of course, things that are totally silly! It may be a good idea to write these observations on a board for reference during the session.

Humour is intrinsically linked to character. Take a moment to pick up on one or two characters from the examples of what the group finds funny, and discuss why something that character does makes your students laugh.

You'll find it's largely because these characters are **unsuited to the role** they find themselves in. For example, Homer Simpson from *The Simpsons* is a father who behaves like a child.

Using the grid on the next page, ask students (in pairs or small groups) to make the funniest pairings between characteristics (in the first grid) and jobs/roles (in the second grid). You'll soon find that the most unsuitable pairings are the funniest...

The
Clumsy
Spy

The
Emotional
Traffic
Warden

The
Allergic
Vet

The
Childish
Parent

Once everyone has an idea of how these conflicts between role and character-type work to make comedy, ask them to try making their own versions, using roles and characteristics not on the grids.

Ask each group to pick their favourite 1-2 examples to be shared with the room and invite the class to think about a couple of simple situations that could occur because of these characteristic conflicts. An **impatient tour guide** for example, may accidentally leave their entire party stranded on a desert island because they couldn't wait to get home!

Activity 2.
CHARACTER GRID

Characteristic

Lazy	Cowardly	Childish	Impatient
Selfish	Allergic	Grumpy	Shy
Bossy	Sensitive	Forgetful	Serious
Clueless	Over-eager	Boring	Talentless
Depressing	Greedy	Chatty	Emotional

Job / Role

Teacher	Doctor	Spy	Princess
Baby	Student	Vet	Coach
Banker	Builder	Politician	Hairdresser
Designer	Counsellor	Police Officer	Chef
Charity Worker	Scientist	Parent	Park Ranger

The Dozy Librarian
by Swanlea School
In this sketch by 11-12 year olds, a librarian who is unsuited to their role is taken on by a desperate library visitor.

The Dead Parrot Sketch
by Monty Python's Flying Circus
A shopkeeper tries to convince a customer that a dead parrot is still alive. He works in a pet shop but he doesn't even care if his animals are alive or dead, which makes him unsuitable for his role.

For each sketch, ask students: why is the character unsuitable for their role and what happens as a result? (In each case, the customer or visitor loses their temper in a funny way).

Activity 4.
MAKING EVERYDAY THINGS FUNNY
15-20 minutes

Ask students to choose a character from the list they wrote before, but for now to just focus on the role: Traffic Warden, Teacher, Parent, Shopkeeper, etc. This activity works best if it's a role they know from real life encounters.

In their groups, ask them to write down a completely usual, everyday exchange that someone in this role might have. For example, a teacher might be talking to a parent about their child at parents' evening, or a shopkeeper might be serving a customer. The conversation needs to show the person in their role (i.e. not just a chat between friends).

Tell students that this exchange is **supposed** to be boring. For example:

THE SHOP
Person 1: Walks to the counter to return something they no longer want
Shopkeeper: Asks what was the reason for the return
Person 1: Explains the reason
Shopkeeper: Asks the person for their receipt and to sign something
Person 1: Signs the paper
Shopkeeper: Processes the return
Person 1: Thanks them and leaves

Ask some groups to read out their examples to make sure everyone has understood the task. Celebrate how ordinary, expected and boring they are.

Now ask the groups to re-write the scene so that it starts and ends in the same way, but in between we see the character being unsuitable for their role. For example, the emotional traffic warden may break into tears while giving someone a ticket. How will the person react?

Invite groups to share their work so far.

Extension Activity.
SILLY WORLDS

30 minutes total

This exercise is similar to the one above, but instead of writing characters unsuited to their roles, the groups will create silly worlds.

A silly world is just the same as our world except for one thing. However everyone treats the one silly thing as if it were normal. The key to making silly world scenes work is to only change one thing. Use the example of an exchange in a shop. If the shop sells attitudes but acts like this is completely normal, how would the scene play out if someone tries to return a bad attitude?

To understand silly worlds, watch these sketches
(12 minutes)

The Killer Joke Sketch
by Monty Python's Flying Circus (stop at 5:31)
A man writes a joke so funny that it kills him and everyone who hears it. Everyone – the news presenter, the army – acts as if this is a perfectly possible scenario.

Ministry of Silly Walks
by Monty Python's Flying Circus
A man seeks funding for a project from the government's weirdest ministry.

The Chicken Shop
by Swanlea School
This chicken shop offers a variety of sauce options, but not in the way we expect. For the shopkeeper and customer though, it's completely normal.

Ask the students: What is silly about the world? How do the people in it react? The key thing is that the people within the world take it completely seriously.

SILLY DIALOGUE (15-20 minutes)

Ask the group for a list of examples of where you would expect to find sensible, expert or instructional conversation (i.e. you would expect people to know what they are talking about and to take themselves seriously). For example:

- TV interview
- YouTube tutorial (cooking, make-up etc)
- Lesson at school
- Sports team talk (half-time talk for example)
- GP surgery
- News programme or documentary

Split the group into pairs. Ask them to pick a scenario, then, using the script scramble sheet on the next page as stimulus, to create a nonsensical and silly dialogue within that scene. Let them know they can be as silly/goofy as they like with their characters. The key is to follow the format of what they'd expect in those scenarios – an easy way to do this is to use an expected intro/greeting and an expected sign off.

Example: NEWS SHOW FORMAT USING SILLY DIALOGUE

"Good evening, in tonight's headlines…"
Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense.
"And now to the weather with Robbie Black…"
Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense.
"Back to you in the studio."
"Thanks for watching and goodnight."

Ask the pairs to share their dialogue with the rest of the group and discuss what is silly about their worlds? What would make the particular silliness of each world clearer?

Extention Activity.
DIALOGUE WRITING: SCRIPT SCRAMBLE

Hi (or) Bye	What are you doing here?
Yesterday was interesting	Is that off?
Cats are stupid	Can you help me ?
You know I hate Spaghetti Hoops	Why are you looking at me like that?
Don't mess this up	Where's Jo?
No (or) Yes	It was you wasn't it?
Something terrible happened	Really?
I already told you	What do you think?
None of your business	When did this arrive?
You know the answer to that	How did you sort that out?
I like Hula Hoops	Is that a wig?
There was a cat stuck up a tree	Can I have that?

RESOURCES

Get Writing with Ministry of Stories
826 Digital

SPECIAL THANKS

Robert Seatter, Head of BBC History
Gem Carmella, Comedy Writer-Performer
Swanlea School

Production team
Luke Finn
Edward Capes
Sky Parlour Films

Volunteer Writing Mentors
Özlem Ceylan Kanipak
Oliver Davy
Vivienne Eka
Jessie Heners
Beccy Kilgarriff
Amar Patel
Dimitra Rizou

Actors
Minder Athwal
Sadia Azmat
Monica Gaga
Ishan Ganjoor
Michael Kunze

ABOUT US

Ministry of Stories champions the writer in every child. We were founded by Lucy Macnab, Ben Payne and best-selling author Nick Hornby, who wanted to create a space for young people in East London to become authors. Through innovative writing clubs, small-group mentoring and fun writing resources, we help young people discover and realise their own creative potential. Ministry of Stories centre was inspired by San Francisco's 826 Valencia and resides behind its own fantastical shop, Hoxton Street Monster Supplies, which has been selling goods such as Cubed Earwax and Thickest Human Snot to London monsters since 1818. All proceeds from the shop go back into the Ministry.

BBC History is the part of the BBC responsible for telling the Corporation's story: past, present and future. "What most motivates us," says Robert Seatter, Head of BBC History, "is to show why the BBC matters, and how it has touched people's lives and made a difference." Key activities include orchestration of major anniversary seasons; cultural partnerships with museums and other agencies; commissioning of in-depth written and oral histories; and wider interpretation of BBC History in our BBC buildings.

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