

Escape with Houdini

Note to teachers: This supplement includes a discussion guide, lessons and Michigan Content Standards to use with the Michigan Time Traveler page. You may reproduce the pages in this supplement to use with students.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

(SOC. 1.3 Analyze and Interpret the Past; SOC.1.1 ELA.3. Meaning and Communication in Context)

- **Who Was Houdini?** What kinds of tricks did Houdini do? What did mediums do that upset him? What did he do about the mediums?
- **Houdini in Michigan:** Where did Houdini perform in Michigan? What was one of the techniques Houdini used to get publicity for his shows? How long did it take Houdini to get out of the straitjacket in his 1916 Grand Rapids performance? When, where and how did Houdini die? Would you go to see Houdini if he came to your community? Why?
- **Magic in Michigan:** What Michigan City is known as “The Magic Capital of the World?” Why is it called that?
- **Thinking about Names:** Both Blackstone and Houdini changed their names. What were their birth names? Why do you think they changed their names? Have you ever changed or wanted to change your name? Why?

VOCABULARY

Discuss these words and their meanings with your students.

- Spiritualism:** The belief that teaches that people can communicate with the dead people's spirits through mediums.
- Medium:** A person who claims to be able to communicate with the spirits of dead people.
- Séance:** A session at which a medium tries to communicate with the spirits of the dead.
- Fraud:** Deceit; a person who cheats by pretending to be something he or she is not.
- Debunk:** To expose exaggerated claims that people make.
- Contortionist:** A person who can twist or turn his or her body into unnatural positions.
- Straitjacket:** A garment used to restrain the arms of a person who is in a violent state.

ACTIVITY ONE: What is Truth?

(SOC.III.2 Ideals of American Democracy; SOC VII.1 Responsible Personal Conduct; ELA 3.Meaning and Communication in Context)

Discuss: Harry Houdini exposed mediums who used magic tricks to deceive and cheat people by charging them for communicating with their dead loved ones. To expose the mediums as frauds, he figured out how to do their tricks and told the public about them. He even convinced a Congressman from New York to introduce an anti-fortune-telling bill to try to outlaw fortune telling as a way of making money.

Truth, one of the core democratic values, is defined as the state of quality of being true, honest, loyal, genuine or sincere. Discuss the meaning of truth with your students. Ask students to talk about what it means to them to be truthful. What is the difference between being honest and dishonest? What is the difference between how Houdini used magic and how mediums used magic? Have students give examples of how people they know have showed honesty or dishonesty. What were the results of events when people showed integrity? What happened when people were dishonest? How do they think people feel when they're honest? Dishonest?

Activity: Fraud is a specific kind of dishonesty. It refers to a person who pretends to be something that he or she is not. Articles about fraud are often in the newspaper, such as those related to the Enron Corporation, World Com Corporation and Miss Cleo. Have students find a story in the newspaper about fraud. Ask them to present an oral or written report about the article and how people's actions did or did not demonstrate truth.

ACTIVITY TWO: Publicity: Getting the Word Out

(ELA 3. Meaning and Communication: Writing; ELA 6. Voice)

Discuss: Houdini was a master at getting publicity for his performances. Newspaper reporters wrote about his appearances in their cities. People were hungry for human-interest stories, and reporters fed them with stories of Houdini's magic. Houdini also held challenges as a publicity tactic to attract more people to attend his scheduled performances. Houdini invited people to dare him to escape from something. Challengers came up with their own ideas, but Houdini and the person had to discuss what the device would be. Once they had worked out the details, then they would publicize the event. Challenges were held on the day or week of his theater performances. The publicity would bring more crowds to the scheduled events.

Activity: Select a class or school activity—a fundraiser, carnival, flower sale or sporting event. Divide into groups and have each group design a promotional campaign for the event. They should identify their main message, the audience for the message and several ways to reach audience. Then have them present a press release or skit to the rest of the class.

ACTIVITY THREE: Communicating through Graphics

(AE 2. Creating)

Discuss: While the written word is an extremely significant medium for communicating information, graphics—or visual design—is also a powerful technique for reaching people. Houdini designed letterhead (as shown on the newspaper page) and posters (see page 4 of this Teachers’ Guide) to promote his performances.

Activity: Distribute the poster to students. Have them discuss the image? Make a list of adjectives to describe the poster. Do the same exercise with modern posters or advertisements for performances or movies. Have students design a poster for a favorite performer or Houdini.

BOOKS

- Long, Bob. *World’s Best Coin Tricks*. New York: Sterling Publishing Co. Inc., 1993.
- Long, Bob. *101 Amazing Card Tricks*. New York: Sterling Publishing Co. Inc., 1993.
- Powers, Melvin. *Blackstone’s Secrets of Magic*. California: Melvin Powers Wilshire Book Co., 1980.
- Blackstone Jr., Harry. *The Blackstone Book of Magic and Illusion*. New York: Newmarket Press, 1985.
- Davidson, Greg. *The Everything Magic Book*. Massachusetts: Adams Media Group, 2000.
- Waldron, Daniel. “The Blackstone Magic Show” *Michigan History Magazine*. September/October 2000, p. 40-46.
- Winchell, Ryan. “Houdini’s Final Act,” *Michigan History Magazine*. September/October 2000, p. 47-48.

WEB LINKS

Houdini Historical Center, Outagamie County (WI) Historical Society

<http://www.foxvalleyhistory.org/houdini/index.html>

Houdini, American Memory, Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vshdini.html>

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vshchrn.html>

Houdini, The American Experience, PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/houdini/filmmore/transcript/transcript1.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/houdini/filmmore/transcript/index.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/houdini/tguide/index.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/houdini/sfeature/index.html>

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