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UNIT 2: THE ART OF SLAPSTICK

Unit Overview

This unit explores the use of slapstick or physical humor as an important part of comedy. By learning about the history of comedy, students recognize the common stock characters that have been part of our culture for many years. This unit provides an opportunity to discuss the way in which humorous depictions of violent acts may desensitize us to empathizing with others.

For thousands of years, slapstick (or physical humor) has been a part of the theater. But recently, live action films for children have been making greater use of slapstick, with more and more outrageous physical stunts involving people getting hurt in weird and horrible ways. Students look at different examples of slapstick in theater, film, television, and advertising.

They learn the strategies that actors use for creating slapstick and how actors plan and reflect on physical humor. Students create their own characters using a “character wheel” to create a character sketch. By creating their own comedy characters, students learn about the important function of characterization in storytelling.

Connections to Character Education can be easily incorporated in this set of activities by exploring the values that slapstick communicates using concepts like **respect** and **compassion**.

The “essential questions” of this unit are:

- **Why do people laugh at comedic characters?**
- **What makes slapstick funny?**
- **How is slapstick humor constructed?**
- **How are characters invented by authors?**
- **How is humor used to make a serious point about a social issue?**



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UNIT 2: THE ART OF SLAPSTICK

Discover what makes physical humor such an important tradition in storytelling, learn the secrets of creating comedy scenes, and invent your own comedy character using the character wheel.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

2.1 The Art of Slapstick

Learn about the history of slapstick humor from its origins in the Middle Ages to the 20th century.

2.2 Oops!

Three scenes help explore how physical humor is constructed.

2.3 Character Wheel

Short scene from *The Nutty Professor* used to analyze the character of the Professor.

2.4 The Underdog

Read from the novel *Crash* by Jerry Spinelli and discuss the problem of bullying.

PRODUCTION ACTIVITY

Create a Character

Invent a comedic character and write a character sketch, a short descriptive passage that gives a vivid picture of your character.

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UNIT 2: THE ART OF SLAPSTICK

CONNECTIONS TO MARYLAND STATE CONTENT STANDARDS

The *Assignment: Media Literacy* curriculum has been designed to align with Maryland State Content Standards. Many of the activities and lessons are modeled upon the structure and format used in the MSPAP tests for language arts and social studies.

For each unit, the standards are listed for each subject area. The numbers at the end of each line refer to specific instructional goals identified in the Maryland Content Standards.

Use the chart below to identify the specific instructional objectives developed in each unit of the program.

MIDDLE SCHOOL LANGUAGE ARTS

1.8.5	Comprehension and Interpretation of Informational Text (all)
2.8.2	Comprehension, Interpretation, and Analysis of Text (#3,4,5)
2.8.3	Comparison of Literary Text from Diverse Cultures (all)
2.8.4	Evaluation of Literary Works (all)
3.8.1	Organization and Focus (all)
3.8.3	Revision and Evaluation of Writing (#1,2,3,4)
3.8.4	Personal Narrative Writing
3.8.8	Independent Writing
4.8.2	Comprehension and Application of Standard English Language Conventions (all)
5.8.1	Active Listening Strategies (all)
5.8.2	Comprehension and Analysis (all)
6.8.1	Organization and Delivery Strategies (all)
6.8.2	Oral Presentations (all)
6.8.3	Evaluation of Oral Presentations

MIDDLE SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES

1.8.7	Identify and trace the development of an author's argument, viewpoint, or perspective in a historical account.
1.8.11	Identify topics, ask and evaluate questions, and develop ideas leading to inquiry, investigation, and research.

MIDDLE SCHOOL VISUAL ARTS

Content Standards

Outcome I	Perceiving and Responding—Aesthetic Education: Expectation A, Indicator 1,2; Expectation B, Indicator 1,2.
Outcome II	Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts: Expectation B, Indicator 2.
Outcome III	Creative Expression and Production: Expectation A, Indicator 1, 2, 3.

MIDDLE SCHOOL THEATRE

Content Standards

Outcome I	Perceiving, Performing, and Responding—Aesthetic Education: Expectation A, Indicator 1, 2; Expectation B, Indicator1, 2
Outcome III	Creative Expression; Expectation A, Indicator 1,2; Expectation B, Indicator 1, 2, 3, 4.
Outcome IV	Aesthetic Criticism; Expectation A, Indicator 1, 2; Expectation B, Indicator 2; Expectation C, Indicator 1, 2, 3.



TEACHER NOTES

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.1 | THE ART OF SLAPSTICK

Students learn about the earliest history of comic characteristics in ancient and medieval entertainment and to see how current comedy characters embody some of the traits found in historic characters.

Getting Started

This activity includes a two-page reading on Activity Sheet 2.1 (A) and (B) and a page with questions for students to answer on Activity Sheet 2.1 (C). Students will need all three pages to complete this activity.

Show the video marked 2.1 to introduce students to the importance of physical comedy as part of storytelling traditions. Ask students if they can identify all the actors and names of films and TV shows included in the video montage. You may be surprised at how many of these images are familiar to them.

Pass out copies of the reading. Ask students to read the first page, including the boxed text. Take time to explore the meaning of the short anecdote about the village idiot in England, described in the text box. Discuss students' reactions to this story.

Invite students to continue reading page two. You may want to have students complete the questions as part of individual student seatwork. Or you may prefer to use the questions as a small-group activity, to stimulate large-group discussion, or as a homework activity.

Questions and Answers:

- 1. Who is the “he” referred to in the first sentence of this article?** “He” is the fool as portrayed throughout history, including theater and literature.
- 2. What does the author mean when she writes “buffoon was the fool’s first name”?** Fools and jesters are not a Jim Carrey or an Adam Sandler invention. The Greco-Roman theater featured fools, called *buffoons*, who amused audiences with their physical humor and clever practical jokes.

3. **What medieval superstition surrounded jesters?** Jesters, because they brought laughter, were good luck and could possibly prevent misfortune.
4. **How did the word “slapstick” come into use?** The word derives from Harlequin’s prop, the wooden paddle made of two slats of wood, which the character used to pretend to whack his adversaries.
5. **In what way is Pantalone a stereotype?** He is portrayed as wealthy, old, and miserly. Expand discussion to explore why it is easier to laugh at a stereotype than at a fully developed character. A fully developed character would have more than just positive or negative personality traits. Pantalone was abstract, an object of scorn.
6. **What common character trait or behavior do most “fools” share, whether they are Greek buffoons, court jesters, village idiots, or a cartoon coyote?** They use their apparent mental or physical deficiencies to get what they want.
7. **Explain the meaning of the last sentence. How is Wile E. like the Coventry idiot?** The idiot always takes the larger but lesser-valued coin because he knows he’ll get more of them. The joke is on the townsfolk who continue to bring people to him with money. The coyote fails every time but that ensures that he’ll be given another chance to try again.
8. **Create a timeline showing the history of slapstick.** The timeline should include these elements:
 - Greco-Roman Theater (buffoons)
 - Medieval England (court jesters and village idiots)
 - *Commedia dell’Arte*, Italy (Harlequin, Pantalone)
 - Slapstick in Vaudeville
 - Three Stooges
 - Abbot and Costello
 - Charlie Chaplin
 - Wile E. Coyote

Extensions

Ask students to bring in examples of modern-day stars of physical humor who exemplify the characteristics of the buffoon.

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.1 (A)

THE ART OF SLAPSTICK

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SLAPSTICK HUMOR

By Catherine Gourley

He sometimes wears a court jester's hat with bells or a patchwork costume of loud colors. Or the fool may wear baggy-legged trousers, floppy shoes, and a derby too small (or too big) for the head. The fool may not even be human—rather a skinny coyote who pins a sheriff's badge to his furry chest and mail-orders ACME demolition kits and rockets in an attempt to capture the fastest bird in the desert, the Road Runner.

No matter the costume or the prop, the fool has performed buffoonery since the days of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In fact, *buffoon* was the fool's first name.

In ancient Greece, "buffoons" traveled about the countryside, telling stories and playing tricks, cleverly stealing a coin from an unknowing person in the audience. Buffoons also performed in the theater, wearing heavily padded costumes and boisterously boxing each other on the head, belly, and buttocks. The mock violence was exaggerated and silly and apparently very

amusing to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

In the 1200s, jesters appeared in England. Many were clever and intelligent, using wit and word play not only to amuse but also to advise kings and other nobility. Some were musicians and acrobats who performed pratfalls and juggling. But other jesters were disabled or deformed and treated cruelly by villagers—ridiculed, prodded, or splattered with rotten fruit. Playing the village idiot often was the only way to earn a meal.

Even so, a widespread belief during these medieval times was that good-humored joking protected a person from misfortune. Jesters, therefore, were good luck pieces who might spread their good fortune to those who were their masters.

Of course if the king were having a bad day or a run of bad luck, he might order the court jester beheaded, according to Daniel Achterman from Princeton University. Was the fool dim-witted or witty? Mocked or the mocker? Read the jest below and decide.

The village idiot provided great amusement to the townsfolk of Coventry. They liked nothing better than bringing every visitor to town to see the fool. They told the visitor to place two coins on the ground before him—a sixpence and a pence. Now, every one knew the sixpence had greater value than the pence. Ah, but the pence was larger in size. The idiot snatched the pence while the townsfolk laughed at his stupidity.

One day, the townsfolk were amusing themselves at this game once again. The newcomer placed the two coins on the ground. As always, the idiot chose the pence. The townsfolk wandered away, still guffawing. The newcomer squatted, stared the idiot in the eyes, and scolded him. "Don't be a fool! The sixpence is worth more! Next time, show them you aren't stupid and choose the sixpence!"

The idiot grinned. "And would I be getting all these pennies if I carried on like that?"

QUESTIONS: What assumption about the idiot do the townsfolk make?

What does the story reveal to be true?

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

UNIT 1 | ACTIVITY 2.1 (B)**THE ART OF SLAPSTICK**

--page 2

Like a Jack-in-the-box, a new kind of fool—and comedy—sprang up in the 1500s during what historians call the Italian Renaissance. (That's just a fancy word for revival of the arts.) The art of comedy, called *Commedia dell'Arte* in Italy, featured two contrasting characters: Harlequin and Pantalone.

Harlequin was poor and stitched his patched tights and tunic from colorful bits of material. He didn't wear the court jester's hat with jingling bells but rather a mask. Harlequin also carried a paddle made of two slats of wood that he pretended to wield as a weapon. The slats slapped together startlingly. It was just more mock violence, however. Like the buffoons and fools who had come before him, Harlequin appeared simple and stupid but really wasn't. His wit—not his slapstick—always got the better of those who were greedy and arrogant.

Pantalone was one of the arrogant. This wealthy merchant constantly looked over his shoulder lest someone rob him of his gold. The old man was a stereotype and no match for Harlequin. Theatergoers of the 1500s loved Harlequin's zany antics and for three hundred years they never tired of watching Pantalone get his comeuppance. Harlequin's character, not to mention his wooden paddle, inspired still another form of comedy in the 1900s . . . *slapstick*.

Slapstick was more than just telling jokes. The humor often developed from an unexpected situation that suddenly arose (also called improvisation), or an ordinary

activity that suddenly went wrong.

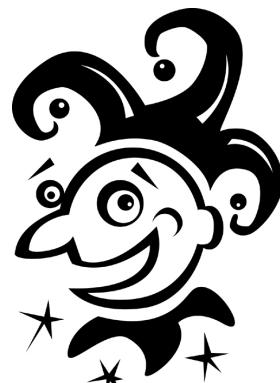
The Three Stooges bake a cake but Curly gets the ingredients wrong and adds bubble gum—an entire box of gum—to the mixture. In Stooge-fashion, he tries to correct the situation but fails. When the wealthy socialite lady bites into her cake, suddenly—to her embarrassment and the audience's hilarity—she blows bubbles each time she attempts to speak!

Even in slapstick the wealthy, the greedy, the arrogant, and the powerful get their comeuppance—often a cream pie in the face.

Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Fatty Arbuckle, and Charlie Chaplin were the masters of slapstick. The costume and the props had changed, but the exaggerated violence and the triumph of the quick-witted underdog—the fool—were still part of the jest.

In 1949, an artist named Chuck Jones created a scrawny cartoon coyote. Wile E. hardly spoke a word but often introduced himself with a business card that read: WILE E. COYOTE, GENIUS. No matter what method he tried—tying a boulder to his feet to gain speed on the Road Runner, painting false tunnels on granite cliffs, strapping himself onto a rocket and lighting the fuse—he failed every time.

So much for genius. And yet, like the village idiot of Coventry, maybe Wile E. wasn't so stupid after all. Think about it. If he *had* caught the Road Runner, would he still be a cartoon celebrity fifty years later?



Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

UNIT 1 | ACTIVITY 2.1 (C)**THE ART OF SLAPSTICK**

Instructions: Answer the questions below using what you learned from the reading.

Questions:

1. Who is the “he” referred to in the first sentence of this article? _____

2. What does the author mean when she writes “buffoon was the fool’s first name”? _____

3. What medieval superstition surrounded jesters? _____

4. How did the word “slapstick” come into use? _____

5. In what way is Pantalone a stereotype? _____

6. What common character trait or behavior do most “fools” share, whether they are Greek buffoons, court jesters, village idiots, or a cartoon coyote? _____

7. Explain the meaning of the last sentence. How is Wile E. like the Coventry idiot? _____

8. On the back of this page, create a timeline showing the history of slapstick humor, using the information you learned from this article.



TEACHER NOTES

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.2 | OOPS!

Students imagine, plan, and perform unusual variations on everyday activities that can result in physical humor. They learn how professional actors plan and rehearse slapstick comedy scene.

Background

Many students have unrealistic ideas about how slapstick scenes are actually created. This activity provides an opportunity for students to learn how much careful planning and attention to safety are involved in creating a slapstick scene. In addition, students discover the importance of brainstorming as a part of the pre-writing process.

Getting Started

Students will plan their slapstick scenes, then watch a video that shows how professionals plan and rehearse their scenes.

You might want students to work on this activity in small groups to make brainstorming more enjoyable for students. The activity sheet provides several ordinary events that could have a slapstick comedy "solution."

Read the instructions aloud and walk through the first example on the activity sheet, about what can go wrong when scrambling an egg. Invite students to work together to create three steps for each of the remaining problems, along with three (Oops!) problems, and three slapstick solutions.

Screen the Video

After students have brainstormed and planned their ideas, show the video that presents three sequences:

- Part 1 shows the rehearsal process, including the process of filming a slapstick scene from different angles to make slapstick look more violent.
- Part 2 shows the role of sound effects, including the use of sounds to make slapstick scenes more amusing.
- Part 3 shows the use of breakaway props like glass bottles made of candy.



The Performing Arts Connection

To explore the performing arts components of physical humor, you might want students to work up a physical routine to perform one of their examples after viewing the processes shown by the actors.

Be sure to warn students that no touching can occur in actually performing the slapstick routines—actors' bodies are too valuable to risk actually getting hurt.

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.2

OOPS!

WHEN EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES GO WRONG

Slapstick may look silly but physical comedy requires a great deal of planning, rehearsal, and creativity. Physical comedy arises from ordinary things going wrong. The comedian attempts to do a simple thing—like hanging a picture on a wall, scrambling an egg, or taking a telephone message—in the most inefficient way. The slapstick strategy looks like this:

Everyday Situation + Oops! = Inefficient but creative (and funny) solution

Example: This classic slapstick example is from the TV comedy show *I Love Lucy*. Comedian Lucille Ball is a worker in a candy factory. As the chocolate drops come down the conveyor belt, she wraps each piece. The Oops! occurs when the candy starts coming fast—really, really fast! Her slapstick solution is to pop the candies in her mouth, scoop them down the front of her uniform, and hide them under her hat! The humor comes from the physical behavior of the character and not from dialogue.

Instructions: Select one of the everyday situations listed below. Identify three steps involved in completing the activity. Then for each step, decide what goes wrong and a zany, illogical but creative solution to the problem. We've done the first one for you. Once you've planned the routine, perform it!

ACTIVITY	STEPS INVOLVED	OOPS!	SLAPSTICK SOLUTION
Scramble an egg	1. Open refrigerator 2. Remove egg from carton 3. Crack egg on pan	Door won't stay open Egg is stuck Egg won't crack	Perform karate chop on door; use teeth to remove egg from carton; place uncracked egg in pan and fry
Hang picture on wall			
Blow bubble from bubble gum			
Dress to go outside in the rain			



TEACHER NOTES

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.3 | CHARACTER WHEEL

Students use the character wheel to build their understanding of the components of a fictional character. This pre-writing activity helps students to develop ideas that will generate lively writing.

Background

Most writing assignments fail in the pre-writing stage. Whether the assignment is to write a first-person narrative, a persuasive argument, or an informative report, if students fail to generate ideas and supportive details and examples in the pre-writing stage, it is likely that the paper will be underdeveloped, “voiceless,” or unoriginal. The character wheel, therefore, can be a valuable tool in the pre-writing stage.

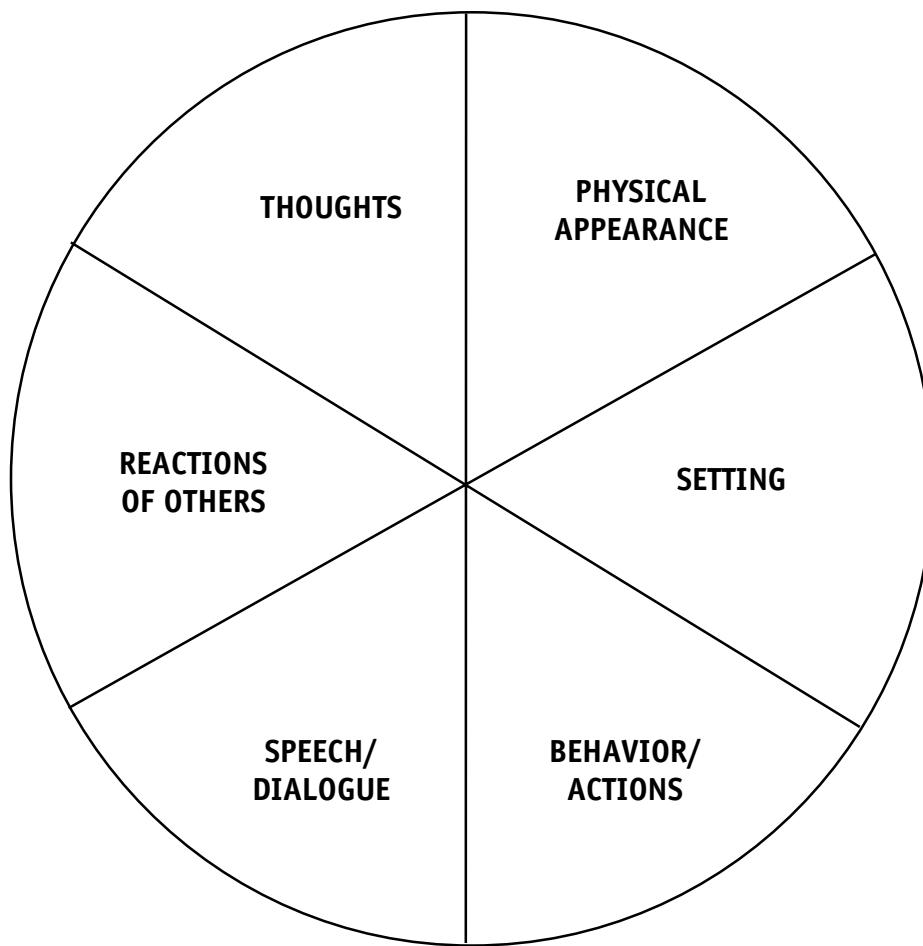
Getting Started

You may want to provide Activity Sheet 2.3 as a handout to give students a visual anchor as you explain the concepts. Begin by explaining that the wheel is a way to develop a new character or analyze an existing character.

Analyzing *The Nutty Professor*

Screen video segment 2.3 which shows a brief scene from *The Nutty Professor* with Eddie Murphy. After viewing, ask students to create a character wheel for the Professor, describing the setting, behavior, speech, etc. Students can work individually, with a partner, or in a small team.

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.3**THE CHARACTER WHEEL:
A GRAPHIC ORGANIZER FOR DEVELOPING
CHARACTERIZATION**

Physical Description: Describe the physical appearance of the character using words that appeal to one of the five senses.

Setting: Describe a particular place and a time inhabited by your character, such as a city, a cave, a bedroom, or a school gymnasium. The time could be the future, the present, or the past.

Behavior: Describe your character doing some action.

Speech: Provide examples of how the character talks.

Reaction of Others: Describe your character through the eyes of another character, capturing that person's attitude.

Thoughts: Describe your character's thoughts, such as desires, fears, or regrets.



TEACHER NOTES

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.4 | THE UNDERDOG

This activity involves students in a critical reading activity that generates opportunities for discussion about bullying, violence, and social relationships.

This activity provides a valuable opportunity to explore Character Education concepts, including **friendship, compassion, caring, and loyalty**. This activity also provides a useful framework for talking with students about bullying and interpersonal violence.

Background and Context

Jerry Spinelli won the Newberry Award for his novel *Maniac McGee*. In that novel, he touched upon a serious subject in a not-so-serious way. Maniac is a homeless kid who manages to survive and bring inspiration and happiness to others.

This activity provides a reading excerpt from another of his novels, *Crash*. In *Crash*, the serious subject is bullying. Crash is a seventh grade football hero. Physically, he's big. Behavior-wise, he gets what he wants mostly by running people over or knocking them down. It is, in fact, how he got his nickname. Penn Webb, however, is Crash's opposite. He's a Quaker. He doesn't believe in violence. He wears peace buttons. And more than anything else, he wants to be Crash's best friend.

When read aloud, these selected passages will trigger laughter. Spinelli wrote them with that goal in mind. But he also had an ulterior motive, to sensitize kids to the stings of bullying. In the final scene, Penn—the underdog, the Harlequin—wins. Crash gets his comeuppance but he brings it on himself. He stomps his water pistol into pieces.

Getting Started

Pass out the two-page Activity Sheet 2.4 (A) and (B). You might want to begin by reading Scene One aloud to motivate student interest. Or you may prefer to have students read silently.

The questions at the bottom of Activity Sheets (A) and (B) can be used in a number of ways. You may prefer to use the questions as an in-class writing activity, with students completing the questions by answering on a separate piece of paper. Or you may prefer to use some of the questions as a small group discussion, with students discussing answers in a small group. You may also want to use the questions as part of a large-group discussion. Finally, you may want to assign the questions as a homework activity.

Conclude the activity by asking students to use the character wheel presented in Activity 2.3 to explore the characters of Crash or Penn. Students can find specific words or phrases from the worksheet to fit each spoke of the wheel.

Questions and Answers:

Scenes 1 and 2

- 1. What specific words or information suggests Crash's age?** "Little red shovel" "digging a hole" plus the response "Poop State" suggest he's five, six, or seven.
- 2. What information suggests Penn is new in town?** He doesn't know Crash. He's wearing a button that he explains is about North Dakota.
- 3. On what does Crash form his first opinion of Penn?** Penn's physical appearance (the button) and his behavior—wanting to shake hands, not fighting back when Crash steals the button.
- 4. Why does Crash make up a name for Pennsylvania and why does he steal and bury Penn's button?** He's trying to be funny but he's also trying to bait or tease Penn.
- 5. Why does Crash think Penn is pitiful?** His house is small; even though he has lots of toys, none of them are guns or soldiers.
- 6. At what points in the scenes did you laugh?** Discuss student answers. It's OK for them to laugh. Spinelli wants them to. But the value comes in analyzing why.

Questions and Answers:

Scene 3: Water Pistols

- 1. What is funny here?** Humor derives from word choice/language (Dummkopf!, hambone) and from Crash's behavior.
- 2. What serious message is Spinelli sending to his readers?** Crash has never encountered someone who *chooses* not to be violent. Spinelli is making a comment on the society in which kids grow up, including media blitzes that feature violent characters and violent situations. Crash's reaction to his frustration is to become violent himself.
- 3. Explain the ages of the kids who might read this and enjoy it. Then explain why humor is an important tool in constructing a serious message for this age group.** Discuss student answers. Typically, this book is read by students in upper elementary grades, ages 8 through 12. Spinelli succeeds at crawling inside the heads of kids and seeing life through their eyes. Often, it's a funny picture.
- 4. Who is the victor in this scene—Penn, with water dripping off his nose, or Crash?** Penn is the victor. Crash destroys his own guns—throwing one away and stomping the other. If they were Penn's guns, of course, the effect wouldn't be funny and Spinelli's point would not be made.

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.4 (A)**THE UNDERDOG**

The story below is an excerpt from the novel *Crash* written by Newberry Award author Jerry Spinelli. It is told from the point of view of John "Crash" Cogan, a seventh grade football wonder. Penn Webb is Crash's opposite. In these scenes, John remembers how he first met Penn.

Scene One: FLICKERTAIL

It was a sunny summer day. I was in the front yard digging a hole with my little red shovel. I heard something like whistling. I looked up. It was whistling. It was coming from a funny-looking dorky little runt walking up the sidewalk. He was walking like he owned the place, both hands in his pockets, sort of swaying lah-dee-dah with each step. Strolling and gawking at the houses and whistling a happy little tune like some Sneezy or Snoozy or whatever their names are.

He wore a button, a big one. It covers about half his chest. Which wasn't that hard since his chest was so scrawny.

So I jumped up from my hole and planted myself right in front of the kid. And what did he do? He gives me this big grin and says, "Good morning. I'm your new neighbor. My name is Penn Webb. What's yours?" And he sticks his hand out to shake.

"What does your button say?" I asked him.

"It says, 'Hi, I'm a Flickertail.'"

"What's a flickertail?"

"It's a squirrel. There are lots of them in North Dakota. That's why it's called the Flickertail State. What is Pennsylvania called?"

"The Poop State." He didn't crack a smile, didn't even know it was a joke. . . .

I plucked the silly button off his shirt, dumped it in the hole I was digging and covered it over with dirt.

The kid froze. His eyes took up his whole face. Then he turned and walked down the block. He wasn't whistling now. I figured that was the last time I'd see that hambone.

Scene Two: PENN'S HOUSE

I couldn't believe it. His house was no bigger than a garage. In fact, I found out that it really was a garage once, until somebody changed it into the world's dinkiest house. The front yard was the size of a bathroom mat.

I looked under his bed. I nosed into his closet. Dump trucks. Fire engines. Cars. Batman. . . . No guns, no soldiers. How pitiful could you get?

Questions:

1. In Scene One, seventh-grader John "Crash" Cogan is remembering the day he first met Penn. What specific words or information suggest Crash's age at the time?
2. What information suggests Penn is new in town?
3. On what does Crash form his first opinion of Penn?
4. Why does Crash make up a name for Pennsylvania and why does he steal and bury Penn's button?
5. In Scene Two, why does Crash think Penn is pitiful?
6. At what points in the scenes did you laugh and what was funny about the scene?

UNIT 2 | ACTIVITY 2.4 (B)**THE UNDERDOG****Scene Three: WATER PISTOLS**

I ran to my room. I got two water pistols, loaded them at the bathroom sink, and brought them out. I gave him one. "Here's yours. Stick it in your pocket like this. We stand five steps apart. At the count of three, draw and fire. Got it?"

He didn't say anything for a long time. The grin was gone. He just stared at the green plastic gun in his hand. He wasn't even holding it right. . . . Finally he looked up at me. "I can't." He looked me dead in the eye. "I'm a Quaker," he said.

"A Quaker?" I screeched. "What's a Quaker?"

"It's somebody who doesn't believe in violence."

"Who says you have to believe in it? You just do it."

"I don't fight in wars."

I laughed. "You hambone, this ain't war. This is water guns . . ."

I shot him right between the eyes with

my water gun. He didn't move. Water trickled down his nose.

That was crazy. Whoever heard of a kid who didn't shoot back? Then all of the sudden I got it. "Hah!" I sneered. "You're trying to trick me!"

I fired three quick shots. He didn't move except to blink when water hit his eyes. I was laughing so hard I thought I'd bust a gut. He held out the water gun I'd given him. His loaded weapon. I stopped laughing.

"You're supposed to shoot back, hambone!" I wound up and whipped his gun over the roof of our house.

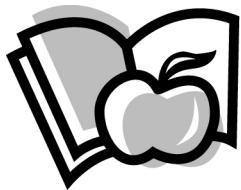
"Dummkopf!"

I slammed my own gun to the ground. I stomped and stomped on it till it was green plastic splinters.

. . . I took a deep breath. I got up in his face. I stared. I dared him to blink first. I wanted to hate him. I wanted to stay mad, but I was having problems.

Questions:

1. How does Spinelli use humor to construct this scene? What is funny here?
2. What serious message is Spinelli sending to his readers?
3. The book from which these passages come are written for a young adult audience. Explain the ages of the kids who might read this and enjoy it. Then explain why humor is an important tool in constructing a serious message for this age group.
4. Who is the victor in this scene—Penn, with water dripping off his nose? Or Crash? Give reasons for your choice.
5. Work with a partner to create a character wheel for either Penn or Crash, using examples from the three passages to fill in the six spokes of the wheel.



TEACHER NOTES



UNIT 2

CREATE A CHARACTER SKETCH

Invent a comedic character and use the character wheel to write a character sketch, a short descriptive writing that gives a vivid picture of a character.

This activity provides students with the opportunity to invent a comedic character and write a character sketch that uses rich descriptive detail to present the character's physical appearance, thoughts, speech, behavior, and a look at how others react to him or her.

Review the Checklist

Pass out the Production Activity worksheet and review the steps in the process needed to complete the activity. Encourage students to check off the steps by using the circles on the left margin. Establish a realistic deadline and monitor students' work during the process.

Evaluation

Use the Evaluation Rubric provided to give students feedback about their writing. You might also want students to evaluate each other's work using this evaluation sheet.

Publishing Student Work on www.AssignmentMediaLit.com

See the Resources section on page 157 to learn how you or your students can send completed character sketches to be published on the *Assignment: Media Literacy* website.

ASSIGNMENT

UNIT 2

CREATE A CHARACTER SKETCH

- (**ASSIGNMENT:** Invent a comedic character and write a character sketch, a short descriptive writing that gives a vivid picture of a character.

USE THIS CHECKLIST TO COMPLETE THE ACTIVITY:

Invent an imaginary character by creating a character wheel.

- Draw the character wheel on a sheet of paper.
- **Spoke 1: Physical description.** Write about what the character looks like. You don't have to describe everything. Consider: face (lips, eyes, hair); physique; clothing; hands, feet.
- **Spoke 2: Setting.** Write about where your character is located right now—at school, at home, at a sports game, at the mall, at a lake, in a dark alley? What's in your character's locker? gym bag? pockets?
- **Spoke 3: Behavior.** Make your character do something. Don't use spoken dialogue yet, just focus on action. Think of vivid verbs to make the action come alive.
- **Spoke 4: Speech.** Create two or three lines of dialogue, but let it grow out of the behavior established on spoke 3.
- **Spoke 5: Reaction of others.** On this spoke, create a second character who observes or interacts in some way with your character. Who is that person and what is his or her reaction?
- **Spoke 6: Thoughts.** What memory does your character suddenly recall? OR what wish does he or she make? Revealing something private about your character, something only you, the character, and the reader know, can create suspense, but it can also help the reader to relate to your character.

Write a character sketch based on your character wheel.

- Review your character wheel and add bits of detail here and there, filling in any blanks.
- Select one spoke—perhaps dialogue or maybe reaction of others—and begin writing. If you get stuck, refer to the ideas and phrases you placed on the wheel for inspiration. Remember that a character sketch is not a short story—it has no beginning, middle, and end. It is a rich description of a character.
- Send your completed writing to the www.AssignmentMediaLit.com website to publish it.



EVALUATION

UNIT 2

CREATE A CHARACTER SKETCH

Student Name: _____

Character is described with rich descriptive detail.

4	The character sketch includes a rich description of the physical characteristics, the setting, the character's behavior and actions, their speech, the reaction of others, and their thoughts. Language choice is effective and communicates rich detail.
3	The character sketch includes a physical description, the setting, the character's behavior and actions, their speech, the reaction of others, and their thoughts, but language choice does not communicate rich detail.
2	Some of the components of the character wheel are not included.
1	Many of the components of the character wheel are not included.

Character is original and imaginative.

4	The character, setting, behavior, and speech are original and imaginative. This character is a "one-of-a-kind."
2	The character, setting, behavior, or speech are reminiscent of other characters in media or literature. This character does not seem "one-of-a-kind."

Sentences are well written.

4	Sentences are written in complete sentence form with no spelling or usage errors.
3	Sentences have some spelling or usage errors.
2	Sentences are not written in complete sentence form.
1	Sentences are not written in complete sentence form and have spelling or usage errors.

Comments:

Grade: