



How To Write A Musical

The Johnny Mercer Foundation presents a Kaufman Music Center production

Overview

In this series, four short video episodes demonstrate to 3rd and 4th grade students what a musical is, and how to go about writing one. They also demonstrate how different writers can take the same story and retell it in different ways. Ultimately, the episodes demonstrate how writing techniques enable writers to find their own unique voice.

Episode One: What Is a Musical?

Episode One begins by defining a musical as “a special way to tell a story which uses both spoken dialogue scenes and songs.” We then go on to explore the process through which a writer or team of writers chooses a story and turns it into a musical, using the story of *The Three Little Pigs* to demonstrate.

Key Concepts:

Musicals have music, lyrics and “book” (script)

Musicals with an active main character are more dramatic

Writers should always ask themselves what they want to say when they tell a story,

Writers develop characters by showing what they want, and what they do to get it

Assignment for Further Study:

Write a scene in which the 3 Little Pigs tell their Mother (and Father) that they wish to leave home in order to find their own houses. Give the scene some *conflict* by having at least one of the characters oppose the wishes of the others. When the scene reaches its most intense conflict, write a short song. Read your scenes aloud, or post them on line. (Use the *Script Format* in the Appendix when writing the scene.)

Questions for Further Discussion:

The 3 Pigs are going off on their own to build new houses. If you were in their situation, what kind of house would you build? What are the important elements of a good house or home?

Analyze another familiar story (Little Red Riding Hood, The 3 Bears, etc.) in terms of action and objective. What do the characters want? Where and how do they come into conflict?

Observe yourself in a conflict situation, at school or at home. What is it you want? Who is preventing you from achieving what you want? What strategies can you use to achieve your goal?

The word “goal” is used in sports as well as in life. When playing a game like soccer or football, the players have opposing objectives, and need to use different strategies to achieve them. How is a soccer game like life? How is it different?

In a soccer or football game, a referee makes sure that the rules are observed. Are there any rules in “life”, and if so, who makes sure they are observed?



Episode Two: *Telling a Story With Song*

Episode Two uses the famous M-G-M 1939 film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, with songs by Harold Arlen and E.Y. “Yip” Harburg, to demonstrate the decisions writers make in writing a musical. We begin by looking at the first chapter in the original book by L. Frank Baum. then contrast the way information is given in a book (verbally) in a motion picture (visually) and in a musical (through song).

The rest of the episode focuses on the role of the “I Want” song in musicals, and on how the song “Over The Rainbow” functions in the musical.

Key Concepts:

Different media require different ways of telling information

Songs in musicals can be used to further the action, tell the story or reveal character

An “I Want” song helps the audience to empathize with and support a character

Assignment For Further Study:

Think of something significant that you want, something that will take some effort to be achieved. (For instance, “I want to be a movie star,” or “I Want to win the game,” as opposed to “I want some candy.”) Then write a paragraph, a story or a song in which you explain what you want, why you want it and what you are willing to do to get it.

Questions for Further Discussion:

Analyze a book you have recently read. Who are the main characters, and what do they want? What do they do to get what they want? What does that reveal about their characters?

Have you ever felt like running away from home? What are the good and bad things that home can represent?

Why is the term “home” used in Baseball? What does it mean to get a home run?



Episode Three: *Finding Your Own Voice*

Episode Three will focus on the 1975 Broadway musical *The Wiz*, by Charlie Smalls and William F. Brown, which reinterpreted *The Wizard of Oz* with contemporary soul music and an African American cast. We begin by discussing Broadway in the 1970s and why producer Ken Harper thought it was important to bring more people of color to Broadway. We see how the songs “Follow the Yellow Brick Road” and “Ease On Down The Road” come at the same moment in the plot. Children are asked to learn the refrain of “Ease On Down The Road” in a singalong format. Then the song “Home” is introduced and sung by Charlotte MacLeod, a child actor. The line “I’ve learned we must look inside our hearts to find a world full of love, like yours, like mine, like home” leads to a discussion of the meaning of “home.”

Key Concepts:

- What is soul music?
- How do you tell a story in your own voice?
- What is the difference between a house and “home”?

Assignment For Further Study:

Think about what home means to you, whether it is a place, people or some combination. Think of places where you feel “at home” other than where you live. Then write a short paragraph, play or song in which you explore those thoughts and feelings.

Questions for Further Discussion:

- What does the word “soul” mean? How do you think that term became associated with “soul music”?
- Why is it important for young people to go to the theater? And do you think it is important for them to hear popular music when they go to the theater?
- How might Dorothy’s feelings about home change from her experience of going to Oz? Did you ever take a trip that changed your feelings about your home?



Episode Four: *Point of View*

Episode Four will focus on the 2003 musical *Wicked*, by Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holtzman, which was expected to re-open on Broadway when the pandemic is over. We begin by discussing how Gregory Maguire based his book on *The Wizard of Oz*, and how Schwartz and Holtzman based their musical on his book. Then we explore the concept of “good” and “bad”, and the fact that one person can have elements of both. We listen to two songs from *Wicked*, one in which the two girls sing about their initial hatred of each other, and one in which they sing of their eventual friendship. As a summary, we return to the concept of “point of view”, and how each person’s musical should be as unique as they are. We offer several examples of writers taking a familiar story but giving it their own “spin.” The episode closes with encouragement for young writers to create their own original work.

Key Concepts:

- People tend to have elements of good and bad in them, and must learn to make good choices.
- Appearances can be deceiving.
- Each individual has a unique point of view to express.

Assignment For Further Study:

Think about a person who may have changed your life for the better, and then write a short story, poem or song about it. Write not only about the person who influenced you, but about yourself, and how you changed or what you learned.

Questions For Further Discussion:

Think about a movie or television show you have seen recently. Was there a clear hero, and also a villain? If so, did the villains have any good qualities, or were they all bad?

Have you ever done anything that you thought was bad? Did it make you a bad person?

Think of a story that you like, and imagine it told from the point of view of a different character. For instance, *Frozen* told from the point of view of Olaf. How might this change the story?



Appendix: Script Format

There are many different formats used for writing scripts. The one demonstrated below is probably the simplest.

Character Name – dash – Line.

(Stage directions in parentheses, indented)

(Song title in parentheses, in quotes and underlined.)

Pig One - I'm moving out.

Pig Two - Me, too.

Pig Three - But where will you go?

Pig One and Pig Two. - Anywhere!!

(Pigs One and Two give each other a “high five.”)

(Song: “We Are Free”)

Pig One and Pig Two – (sing)

WE ARE FREE, WE ARE FREE,

DON'T TRY TO HOLD US DOWN.

WE ARE FREE, WE ARE FREE,

AND WE'RE GONNA GO TO TOWN.