

Unit Plan for Mark Twain and American Humor

Subject/Topic/Twain text

American Literature/American Humor/"The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," *Life on the Mississippi*, other humorous short stories

Goal

Students will research and analyze the techniques of Mark Twain's style of humor

Specific and measurable content objectives

This unit plan addresses the following Indiana standards:

- 11.3.1 Analyze characteristics of subgenres, types of writings such as satire, parody, allegory, and pastoral that are used in poetry, prose, plays, novels, short stories, essays, and other basic genres.
- 11.3.3 Analyze the ways in which irony, tone, mood, the author's style, and the "sound" of language achieve specific rhetorical (persuasive) or aesthetic (artistic) purposes or both.
- 11.3.5 Analyze or evaluate works of literary or cultural significance in history (American, English, or world) that:
 - o reflect a variety of genres in each of the respective historical periods.
 - o were written by important authors in the respective major historical periods.
 - o reveal contrasts in major themes, styles, and trends.
 - o reflect or shed light on the seminal philosophical, religious, social, political, or ethical ideas of their time.
- 11.4.1 Discuss ideas for writing with classmates, teachers, and other writers.
- 11.4.2 Demonstrate an understanding of the elements of discourse, such as purpose, speaker, audience, and form, when completing narrative, expository, persuasive, or descriptive writing assignments.
- 11.4.3 Use point of view, characterization, style, and related elements for specific narrative and aesthetic (artistic) purposes.
- 11.4.4 Structure ideas and arguments in a sustained and persuasive way and support them with precise and relevant examples.
- 11.4.7 Develop presentations using clear research questions and creative and critical research strategies, such as conducting field studies, interviews, and experiments; researching oral histories; and using Internet sources.
- 11.4.9 Use a computer to integrate databases, pictures and graphics, and spreadsheets into word-processed documents.
- 11.4.13 Integrate quotations and citations into a written text while maintaining the flow of ideas.
- 11.5.2 Write responses to literature that:
 - o demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the significant ideas in works or passages.
 - o analyze the use of imagery, language, universal themes, and unique aspects of the text.
 - o support statements with evidence from the text.
 - o demonstrate an understanding of the author's style and an appreciation of the effects created.

- identify and assess the impact of perceived ambiguities, nuances, and complexities within the text.
- 11.5.6 Use varied and extended vocabulary, appropriate for specific forms and topics.
- 11.6.1 Demonstrate control of grammar, diction, paragraph and sentence structure, and an understanding of English usage.
- 11.6.2 Produce writing that shows accurate spelling and correct punctuation and capitalization.

Key Vocabulary

Caricature
 Irony
 Joke
 Wit
 Template

Materials list

Students need access to computers, printers, and the Internet. They also need access to the works of Mark Twain, either online or in print, and a copy of the video *Mark Twain Tonight!*

Clear directions for implementation w/approximate time use/schedule

This unit lasts 10 days. The assignment sheet that I give students (see below) is posted online so that students have access to the hyperlinks.

Day One: Introduce the project; visit the Kennedy Center Web page and read about the award. Students write a summary.

Day Two: With a partner, students read and discuss different elements of humor. List the types of humor that are most common today.

Day Three: Read an excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. Discuss types of humor present. Students write an analytical paragraph.

Days Four and Five: Begin by discussing Twain one-liners, either as a class or in small groups. As the discussion concludes, students move to independent reading of “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” and a second story of their choosing. They write a one-paragraph summary of each story and create a list of the types of humor present in the stories.

Day Six: Watch the video, *Mark Twain Tonight!* starring Hal Holbrook. As a class, discuss how understanding Twain’s humor is affected by seeing it performed instead of reading it. Students write a response to the video.

Days Seven-Nine: Students design and produce brochures explaining Mark Twain’s humor.

Day Ten: Students share their finished brochures.

Evaluation method

During this unit students produce several pieces of writing.

The Day One summary of the Kennedy Center Mark Twain Prize for Humor can be assessed using this rubric:

	Novice	Acceptable	Exemplary
Accuracy of content			
Use of Standard Written English			
Format and Timeliness			

The Day Three analytical paragraph of the humor present in *Life on the Mississippi* can be assessed using this rubric:

	Novice	Acceptable	Exemplary
Accuracy and completeness of analysis			
Use of Standard Written English			
Format and Timeliness			

The Days Four and Five summaries and lists can be assessed using this rubric:

	Novice	Acceptable	Exemplary
Accuracy of summary			
Use of Standard Written English			
Format and Timeliness			

The Day Six response to the video can be assessed using this rubric:

	Novice	Acceptable	Exemplary
Completeness of content, including use of quotations.			
Use of Standard Written English			
Format and Timeliness			

The final brochure can be assessed using this rubric:

	Novice	Acceptable	Exemplary
Content, including use of quotations.			
Use of Standard Written English			
Brochure design			
Timeliness			

Assignment Sheet: Mark Twain and American Humor

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D. C., awards The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, named after America's first stand-up comedian. You have been hired to write and design a brochure explaining why the highest award our country can bestow upon a comedian was named for Mark Twain. This brochure will be given to members of the audience as they attend the ceremony to name this year's winner of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor.

You will need to know a little bit about the award itself, so [read about the award and its past recipients](#) first. Write a summary of this information.

You will want to understand what makes things funny. [Read about different elements of humor](#). Discuss with a partner those elements you recognize most easily. Find examples of those elements with which you are not as familiar. Make a list of the type(s) of humor you believe are most common today.

You need to learn about Mark Twain's style of humor. To do that, complete the following tasks:

- Read the excerpt from Twain's autobiography, *Life on the Mississippi*, found in your textbook beginning on p. 453. What type(s) of humor are most common in that excerpt? Write a paragraph about the humor in this excerpt and be sure to quote examples.
- Read the Twain one-liners on p. 465. What commonalities do you notice about them? How are they different from one-liners by, say, Dave Chapelle, David Letterman, or Margaret Cho? Take notes as you discuss them – you may want this information when you write the contents of your brochure.
- Read at least 2 more short stories by Mark Twain. One of them MUST be "[The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County](#)." You may [choose the second story yourself](#) (scroll down to short stories; make sure the story is intended to be humorous). Hand in one-paragraph summaries of the two stories.
- Make a list of the types of humor that you notice most often in Twain's writing. Which of those types, if any, is also common today? Add these observations to your list of notes from your discussion of the one-liners.
- Watch the video *Mark Twain Tonight* starring Hal Holbrook. How is your understanding of his humor affected by seeing it performed instead of reading it? Write a response to the video.

By the time you have completed all of the above, you have gathered a great deal of information about Mark Twain. You are ready to write and design your brochure. Here are some resources that will help you with your design:

- [Brochure Design Tips](#)
- [Templates for Trifold Brochure](#)
- [One template, many design tips](#)

Keep in mind that your brochure's purpose is to help your reader, the audience at the Kennedy Center, better understand Mark Twain's style of humor. You will be evaluated on your content (including use of quotations), on your use of Standard Written English, on your brochure design, and on your timeliness.