

**Short Story Lesson Plan: “Encounter with an Interviewer”**  
**Mark Twain Teachers Workshop – Mark Twain Museum**  
**June 19-23, 2006 – Hannibal, Missouri**  
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**Sketch Title:** “An Encounter with an Interviewer” by Mark Twain

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Time Frame:** One day to up to two weeks, depending on your emphasis and approach.

**Background information:**

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mark Twain was regarded as much as a celebrity as he was known as an author. Being such a public figure, he was often interviewed. Of course, he had been a reporter himself in Nevada and California in the mid 1860s, and so he was more than familiar with how the interviewing game was played. This comic sketch, “An Encounter with an Interviewer,” may well have been Twain’s way of turning the tables on the sorts of interviewers he particularly disliked.

**Literary/Language Arts Focus:** multiple perspectives, satire, dialog.

**State Standards:**

From Missouri’s “Show-Me Standards”: 3.5 Reason inductively and deductively; 3.6 Multiple perspectives, 3.7 Evaluate the extent to which a strategy addresses the problem.

**Curriculum Connections:** Journalism, Video Production

**Vocabulary:** dapper, pert (“peart”), salient, singularly, fortnight, discrepancy

**Materials/Technology Support:**

(Should you wish to go in a more hands-on, less strictly literary direction):

- Several videotapes of interviews of current political and/or entertainment celebrities
- In-class video equipment and monitor for class playback
- Video of Hal Holbrook portraying Mark Twain
- Interviews with Mark Twain available online at <http://www.twainquotes.com/interviews/interviewindex.html>

**Questions All Students Will Need to Consider before Reading the Sketch:**

- 1) What makes a person famous? (At least one answer; more would be better.)
- 2) How can fame be both a benefit and a burden? (Again, at least two examples of each; more would be better.)
- 3) Why do interviewers seek out famous people to question? (Find at least one answer that goes beyond the “Because they are assigned to do so” kind of answer; what is the point of the interviewing process? (At least one thoughtful answer; more would be better.)
- 4) How does one identify an agenda present either in questions asked by the interviewer OR in answers provided by the person being interviewed? (At least four answers, two regarding interviewer, and another two from the point of view of the subject; more would be better)

(8 TOTAL ANSWERS MINIMUM)

**Content Objectives:**

- Students will ask themselves the four questions listed above, generating at least eight answers. (20%)
- Students will read “An Encounter with an Interviewer,” by Mark Twain, and will define the six vocabulary words listed above. (10%)
- Students will analyze deductively the perspective of the interviewer, indicating at least two specific moments in the interview that suggest his intent in conducting the interview. (20%)
- Students will analyze deductively the intent of the man being interviewed (in this case Mark Twain himself), again pointing out at least two specific instances where he indicates his unspoken agenda. (20%)
- Students will cite two specific moments in the interview that convey the emotional state of each of the participants. (10%)
- Thinking inductively, students will draw a conclusion based on their observations above as to which of the two participants has been more successful in achieving his intended agenda. (20%)

**Related Twain Quotes/Stories:**

- “I have, in my time, succeeded in writing some very poor stuff, which I have put in pigeonholes until I realized how bad it was, and then destroyed it. But I think the poorest article I ever wrote and destroyed was better worth reading than any interview with me that ever was published.” (quoted in “Mark Twain, A Conglomerate Interview, Personally Conducted by Luke Sharp,” *The Idler*, Feb. 1892)
- “Whenever you give an interviewer a fact, give him another fact that will contradict it. Then he’ll go away with a jumble that he can’t use at all. (from *Mark Twain’s Speeches*, “The Robert Fulton Fund”)
- “[Sometimes] the interviewed has nothing to say, and the interviewer does not know how to make him say it. Sometimes in despair they write up a lot the man never said, never intended to say, and couldn’t say if he thought of it.” (from the *South Australian Register*, 10/14/1895)

**The Lesson:**

| Time      | Teacher Activity/Questions:   | Student Activity  |
|-----------|---|---|
| 1-3 Days  | Students would be given the four questions and Content Objectives along with the Sketch itself, to read and write about as a homework assignment (perhaps they might want two nights to do all this work). The day after the students have read and responded to the story with their answers, students would engage in a discussion during which they would share their conclusions. I also want to have a class tally taken to indicate both speakers’ implied agendas and, most importantly, which of the two the class feels has “won” the interview.   | Read the sketch; complete the assignment.                     |
| 1-3 Weeks | Here the focus shifts to the process of interviewing itself. Teachers might want to begin with the activities listed above, and then branch out into a study of interviews as we know them today. Taking tapes from <i>Entertainment Tonight</i> , <i>The O’Reilly Factor</i> , <i>The Colbert Report</i> , etc. students could discover the bias, the agendas implied both in the questions asked and the answers given in these forums.<br><br>Finally, students could themselves construct questions (if they were to be playing the role of interviewer) or answers (if they were playing the role of the person being interviewed) that would have specific, but unstated, agendas. Interviews would then be taped and played back to the class as a whole. Class members could ask both the interviewers and those interviewed about the tensions of the process (e.g. “How can an interview subject respond to an agenda driven question?” “How does an interview subject advance his own agenda through her/his answers to questions?”) | View and evaluate interviews; write and role play interviews. |

### **Assessment/Evaluation (Options for mastery):**

- The percent indications listed with the Content Objectives can provide at least a tentative guide in assessing the pre-work of the 1-3 day preparedness of students studying Twain.
- For longer units on the art and process of interviewing, students can respond to videotaped interviews (for each interview they should identify at least two instances of the interviewer's agenda (25%); two instances of the subject's agenda (25%); at least one instance of success of either person's purpose and one instance of failure (25%), and a conclusion regarding the relative success of each participant (25%).
- If students are creating their own video interviews, the element of creativity becomes an important part of the overall assessment. My own inclination might be to weight assessment along these lines: Clarity of purpose on the part of the actor/interviewer and actor/celebrity: 40 %; Creativity in presentation: 30%; Effectiveness in delivery: 30%.

### **Possible Follow-up Activities:**

- Have the students do some quick research on Aaron Burr. Why/how does some historical knowledge make the story funnier?
- Why isn't the entire article written in the Q. and A. format? What function does the introductory section serve?
- Fact: Mark Twain was born in November of 1835. Take a close look at his answer to the question, "When did you begin to write?" His response is obviously comic, but in what important way is it also true?
- Fact: Mark Twain was in his mid-thirties when he wrote this sketch. In what way(s) is he also "nineteen"?

### **FINALLY—AND MOST IMPORTANT!**

Friends and colleagues: We must NEVER forget that education is about JOY and ENLIGHTENMENT, not course or content objectives. Mark Twain is FUNNY. He also can be profound and, sometimes, startlingly contemporary. But if we stop having fun, we must immediately put on the brakes and take another road. School's too short to turn inspired humor into (even achieved) educational objectives. The life of the patient is more important than the success of the operation. May we always keep our eyes on the patient, our precious students! Thrive!



**Mark Twain being interviewed in bed – Vancouver (August 18, 1895)**