

Short Story Lesson Plan
Mark Twain Teachers Workshop - Mark Twain Museum
June 19-23, 2006 - Hannibal, Missouri
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Short Story Title: “The McWilliamses and the Burglar Alarm” (1882)

Summary: The McWilliamses had a burglar alarm installed in their new home, which failed to prevent unwanted entry into their home. In fact, Mr. McWilliams encountered burglars in his home on a regular basis. The absurdity continued as the alarm company was able to entice the owners to invest more and more money into an already horrible experience.

Grade Level: Grades 3-5 (can be adapted for older grades)

Time Frame for Lesson: 4 days (can be modified for one day)

Background Information: This short story was written in response to the burglary Mark Twain experienced in his own home in New York.

Literary/Language Arts Focus: absurdity, deadpan humor, exaggeration; summarization; prediction; parody; business letter format

State Standards: Missouri – Communication Arts R3-5

Curriculum Connections: Science/Social Studies (inventions); Art (design; illustrations)

Vocabulary: heathen, furtive, clandestine, formidable, defect, catastrophe, tranquil, stipulated, compensating, calamity; concept of an “expert”

Materials:

- Story
- Old advertisements for burglar alarms; pictures of burglar stereotypes
- Recent newspaper article about a burglary
- Smoke alarm or other alarm
- Newspaper article from Clemens’ real life burglary in New York
- Video clip of advertisement for alarm systems
- “Notice to the Next Burglar” written by Samuel Clemens
- Copies of related documents (i.e., newspaper articles and letters from Sam Clemens’s birthplace in Florida, MO, etc.)

Technology Support:

- Twain quotes online at: <http://www.twainquotes.com>
- Story available online at: <http://www.thathomesite.com/twain/alarm/>
- *New York Times* article – “Burglars Invade Mark Twain Villa” (Sept. 19, 1908) about actual burglary at Twain villa: <http://www.twainquotes.com/19080919.html>
- *New York Times* article – “Babies as Burglar Alarms” (Dec. 15, 1880): <http://www.twainquotes.com/18801215.html>
- Business letter format online at: <http://www.writeexpress.com/business-letter-format.html>
- National Burglar & Fire Alarm Association <http://www.alarm.org/>
- Better Business Bureau <http://bbb.org/>

Content Objectives:

- Students will write a humorous letter of complaint using the business letter format.
- Students will re-create and organize a presentation of the story.

Related Twain Quotes/Stories/Articles:

- Put all your eggs in one basket and – WATCH THAT BASKET. (from *Pudd'nhead Wilson*)
- "Experience of the McWilliamses with Membranous Croup" – Twain short story (1875)
- "Mrs. McWilliams and the Lightning" – Twain short story (1880)

THE LESSON:

Time	Teacher Activity/Questions	Student Activity
Day 1 2 min	Hook: Sound an alarm. Play recording of various alarms and read article from newspaper of real burglary.	Listen
4 min.	Discuss vocabulary and concepts needed to understand the story. Ask students about related experiences they might have had.	Listen and respond
10 min.	Read aloud first part of story (about 2/3). End after this sentence: <i>Well, it goes without saying that in the course of time all the rooms were taken off, and the entire machine was out of service.</i>	Listen
7 min.	Ask students about the events that have occurred so far. Questions should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was "the expert" really an expert? Why or why not? • Was the alarm company reputable? Why or why not? • What makes the story funny? (Lead discussion about the absurdity of "visiting" with burglars, etc.) • What is the funniest part in your opinion? Tap into prior knowledge about false alarms (car alarms, etc.), being overcharged for services, etc.	Listen and respond
7 min.	Closure: Ask students to brainstorm their predictions for how the story will end. Be sure to practice deferred judgment when listing all of their predictions on the board (being careful not to "over praise" a particular suggestion as being better than the others) so that there will be many predictions listed. (Possibly ask students to vote on which prediction will be correct.)	Listen and respond
Day 2 5 min.	Hook: Hold up a picture of a crystal ball or some other image to indicate you are about to "predict the future." Review 1 st half of story by asking students to summarize what has happened so far. Review the predictions they suggested in the first lesson and ask if they have any more suggestions to add before you finish the story.	Listen and respond
15 min.	Reread the paragraph where you left off, and then finish by reading the end of the story. Ask students which prediction was the closest to being correct. Discuss alternative endings. Ask what the McWilliams family should do next. If no one suggests it, suggest writing a letter of complaint to the company or to the Better Business Bureau.	Listen and respond
10 min.	Closure: Review the components of a business letter. (Include the visual format on the board or wall.) Tell students they are going to assume the role of Mr. or Mrs. McWilliams and write a humorous letter of complaint to either the manufacturer or the Better Business Bureau. They can begin the draft in class and finish as homework. The letter must be in correct format according to stated guidelines.	Listen Begin draft
Day 3 10 min.	Hook: Teacher can pretend to be the owner of the company. "I've heard there are some complaints about my wonderful product!" Act offended, etc. Invite students to read aloud their letters of complaint. Continue to act offended. Encourage humor!	Listening and taking turns reading letters

10 min.	Ask students if they enjoyed the story, if it reminded them of other stories (real or fiction), etc. Tell them they are going to get to re-create Twain's story in a format of their choice. They can choose to work in groups, pairs, or alone. Share the list of options from which they can choose, and encourage them to suggest their own ideas. The requirement is that they will re-create and present the story to class, which will be evaluated with the scoring guide provided.	Listen and respond
10 min.	Closure: Circulate and facilitate discussions about which presentation format they will select. NOTE: Although presentations occur on "Day 4" students may need several days to prepare for their presentations.	Discuss options with each other; select their presentation format.
Day 4 30 min.	Observe student presentations.	Present; listen to each other

Assessment/Evaluation (Options for mastery):

Objective 1: Students will write a humorous letter of complaint using the business letter format. (Scoring guide below)

Students will choose one of the following:

Objective 2: Students will re-create and organize a presentation of the story using Twain's style of absurdity and humor by selecting one of the options below. (Scoring guide below)

- Create and perform a Readers' Theatre version of the story.
- Create and perform a *Saturday Night Live* type of parody of the story.
- Create and perform a skit of the story.
- Create and perform a news broadcast that covers the events of the story using deadpan (straight faced) humor.
- Write and perform an "interview" with Mr. McWilliams.
- Write and perform a sequel based on one of the predictions.
- Create a Sunday comic depicting the story.
- Retell the story from another character's perspective (e.g., a burglar, Mrs. McWilliams, etc.)
- Retell the story in a modern setting about a car alarm that repeatedly goes off.
- Students can suggest an appropriate option.

Scoring Guide for Letter Writing Assignment:

	3 (Meets expectations)	2 (Approaches expectations)	1 (Expectations not met)
Grammar 10%	Free of punctuation and grammatical errors	Few (2-4) punctuation and grammatical errors	Several (5+) punctuation & grammatical errors
Spelling 10 %	Free of spelling errors	Few (2-4) spelling errors	Several (5+) spelling errors
Creativity/Originality /Humor 10%	Humor is highly creative and unusual	There is sufficient humor and creativity	Little to no humor and creativity
Correct Business Letter Format 70%	Adheres to specified guidelines with no more than one formatting error	Two to four formatting errors.	Five or more formatting errors.

Scoring Guide for Re-creation and Presentation of Story:

	3 (Meets expectations)	2 (Approaches expectations)	1 (Expectations not met)
<p>Presentation: Written (grammar, spelling, etc.)</p> <p>or</p> <p>Presentation (skit, etc.)</p> <p>50%</p>	<p>If a written presentation (story, etc.), free of punctuation and grammatical errors; free of spelling errors; neat and attractive; effective use of visuals.</p> <p>If a presentation, engaging, well planned and executed.</p>	<p>If a written presentation, few punctuation and grammatical errors; few spelling errors; neat; appropriate visuals.</p> <p>If a presentation, little evidence of planning or rehearsal.</p>	<p>If a written presentation, several punctuation and grammatical errors; several spelling errors; sloppy and unattractive; use of visuals is ineffective.</p> <p>If a presentation, unorganized and unprepared.</p>
<p>Retelling of story events (accurately retells the story through parody or other humorous means)</p> <p>50%</p>	<p>Includes excellent example of absurdity, deadpan humor, and exaggeration. Student clearly understands and employs these literary devices. Main events are spoofed or retold in an appropriate and accurate way.</p>	<p>Humor is evident, but student does not clearly employ the literary devices of absurdity, deadpan humor, or exaggeration. Main events of the story are addressed but lacking in humor.</p>	<p>There is little to no use of absurdity, deadpan humor, or exaggeration. Student does not appear to understand these literary devices. Main events of the story are not addressed.</p>

Strategies used in lesson to support learners with special needs, (e.g., English language learners, gifted, learning disabled, etc.):

- Background, prior knowledge and vocabulary are discussed ahead of time to support comprehension.
- Reading aloud to students allows them the opportunity to hear inflections that carry meaning. They can also follow along to see how certain words are pronounced.
- Opportunities are provided for discussion and interaction.
- Options for assessment provide choice and promote student interest.
- The use of “realia” or primary documents (Burglary notice, articles from event, etc.)

Possible Follow-up Activities:

- Read related stories, such as the other McWilliamses stories.
- Write a *National Enquirer*-type story about a burglary in a current celebrity’s home.
- Write an article or story exaggerating an event in your personal life.
- Write a letter to your teacher exaggerating why you don’t have your homework done on a continual basis.
- Write a story using deadpan humor describing a horrible experience in your own life.
- Write a letter using absurdity convincing your parents that you need a new vehicle.

Possible Guest Speakers/Other Resources:

- Alarm specialist
- How a Burglar Alarm Works online at: <http://home.howstuffworks.com/burglar-alarm.htm>

Notice: To the Next Burglar:

There is nothing but plated ware in this house, now and henceforth. You will find it in that brass thing in the dining room, over the corner by the basket of kittens. If you want the basket put the kittens in the brass thing. Do not make a noise - it disturbs the family. You will find rubbers in the front hall by that thing which has the umbrellas in it - chiffonier I think they call it, or pergola, or something like that. Please close the door. Yours truly,

S. L. CLEMENS.

