# *Finding Humor Amidst Darkness: A Comedy*

## Language Arts Challenge

### Due: April 7, 2023
### Designed for Middle and High School Students

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| | Thinking, Presentational Skills |
|---|---|

# The Challenge

It goes without saying that these are very challenging times. From the pandemic to climate change, the war in the Ukraine to the meteoric rise of disinformation, there is a feeling of heightened anxiety characterizing the start of this decade. For many, one of the best weapons we have at our disposal to combat anxiety and societal discomfort is …humor.

Humor – particularly 'dark humor' which is about finding 'funny' amidst the 'unpleasant'– can help people cope with the anxiety and fear of a stressful situation. This Challenge is straight forward and has an altruistic quality to it:  create a short digital story that addresses a source of global or regional anxiety using humor, … and help bring a little laughter into the world.

<u>**Deliverables**</u> **include:**
- The Comic Digital Short Story (this is the only Meridian Stories deliverable)
- Summary of Select Issue (at teacher's discretion)
- First Draft Script (at teacher's discretion)

# Assumptions and Logistics

<u>Time Frame</u> - We recommend that this digital storytelling project takes place inside of a three to four-week time frame.

<u>Length</u> - All Meridian Stories submissions should be under 4 minutes in length, unless otherwise specified.

<u>Slate</u> **- All digital storytelling projects must begin with a slate that provides:**
   a) the title of the piece;
   b) the name of the school submitting;
   c) the wording 'Permission Granted' which gives Meridian Stories the right to a) publicly display the submission in question on, as linked from, related to or in support of Meridian Stories digital media; and b) use or reference it for educational purposes only, in any and all media; and
   d) We strongly recommend that students do **not** put their last names on the piece

either at the start or finish, during the credits.

Submissions - Keep in mind that each school can only submit three submissions per Competition (so while the entire class can participate in any given Challenge, only three can be submitted to Meridian Stories for Mentor review and scoring).

Teacher Reviews - All reviews by the teacher are at the discretion of the teacher and all suggested paper deliverables are due only to the teacher. The only deliverable to Meridian Stories is the digital storytelling project.

Teacher's Role and Technology Integrator - While it is helpful to have a Technology Integrator involved, they are not usually necessary: the students already know how to produce the digital storytelling project. And if they don't, part of their challenge is to figure it out. They will! *The teacher's primary function in these Challenges is to guide the students as they engage with the content.* You don't need to know editing, sound design, shooting or storyboarding: you just need to know your content area, while assisting them with time management issues. See the **Teachers Role** section of the site for further ideas about classroom guidance.

Digital Rules/Literacy - We strongly recommend that all students follow the rules of Digital Citizenry in their proper usage and/or citation of images, music and text taken from other sources. This recommendation includes producing a citations page at the end of your entry, if applicable. See the **Digital Rules** area in the **Meridian Stories Digital Resource Center** section of the site for guidance.

Location – Try not to shoot in a classroom at your school. The classroom, no matter how you dress it up, looks like a classroom and can negatively impact the digital story you are trying to tell.

Collaboration - We strongly recommend that students work in teams of 3-4: part of the educational value is around building collaborative skill sets. But students may work individually.

# The Process

Below is a suggested breakdown for the students' work.

**During <u>Phase I</u>, student teams will:**

- There are two fundamental elements to this story: the topic /issue – the source of anxiety – and the comedy. We recommend that you begin by identifying what issue you think needs to be addressed through this comic lens; what issue – be it global, national, or regional – does your team feel passionate about taking on?  Or what issue does your team feels could use some levity in order to better cope with and, ultimately, understand the dynamics shaping the issue.
- Dissect that issue into attributes that are relevant to you and your team. Choose up to five attributes around which you may want to create a comic story. For example, what are some of the attributes of the ever-evolving pandemic? Isolation. Masks. Social Distancing. Zoom. Hand sanitizer. Remote working and learning. Curbside pick-ups. Parents, like, everywhere! Booster shots. Identify your five attributes – they could be topics, things, or trends - that have cropped up to define the issue and humanity's role in the issue.
    - *Teacher's Option* **– One to Two Page Summary of Select Issue** – Teachers may require that teams hand in a one to two page paper defining the issue and the societal dynamics shaping the issue, as followed by five attributes of the issue, one or more of which may be featured in their digital story.
- Have each team member pick one of your select attributes and research it. Each team member should produce up to a page that describes the various assets of the select attribute. The more details you unearth, the more with which you have to work for your comic story. Questions to consider include:
    - What are the primary causes of the problem?
    - What are the some of the solutions – often behavior changes - that individuals or groups or cultures should be aiming to implement?
    - What are the attitudes in society that is, from your perspective, making this issue worse rather than better?
    - What are some of the key props - a term we are using loosely to refer to, in the instance of the pandemic, masks, COVID tests, social distancing, and booster shots - that are integral to the issue?
- By the end of Phase I your team will have identified four or five key attributes of your select issue and broken down each select attribute into its component parts.

**During Phase II, student teams will:**

- Begin with reflections about comedy and humor.

Maya Angelou, one of humanity's most compassionate and articulate writers, had an affinity for laughter. Laughter was at the center of her sense of being. Use some of these quotes from Maya Angelou to help inspire your storytelling.

> **Laugh as often as possible. You must. Because the world will offer you every reason to weep. So as often as possible, you laugh. That, I think, is part of the Great Love.**

> **Every day I awaken I am grateful. My intent is to be totally present in that day. And laugh as much as possible.**

> **I am serious, so I laugh a lot. You need to laugh. You don't laugh enough. I don't trust anyone who doesn't laugh.**

- Now, imagine that your team is the comedy writing team for a TV program – perhaps late-night television in the mode of *The Daily Show*. You ARE the comic writers. In Phase II, we move from the research around the issue you have chosen to the creation of comedy.
- Begin by focusing on one attribute (from your work in Phase I) at a time and brainstorming about the inherent comedy that can be extracted from the attribute – be it, for example, fracking, wind power or plastics in the ocean, …if climate change is your select issue. The objective is to a) decide what is funny about the issue; b) begin to situate what is funny inside of a scene or story; and c) decide how that humor is going to lead to a new and surprising understanding of the issue.
  - o The best comedy isn't just there to make you laugh. The best comedy opens pathways into a new understanding of the issue. This is an important truth about comedy that your team should come back to again

and again: how will the audience see the issue in a new way as a result of your comic digital story?

- Write down your basic comic ideas, skits, stories, or approaches for all five of your attributes. You will only produce one or two, so don't worry about how they will all work together.

> Keep in mind, that your humor can be informed by memes, TikToks, or Instagram stories. Your humor can be informed by classic TV series like *The Office*, *The Simpsons*, *Mystery Science Theatre 3000: The Return*, *Parks and Recreation,* or *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Your humor can come from a series of interviews with family members. Your humor can come from just you and your command of storytelling, as you relate to us, for example, an *exaggerated* …day in your life. Exaggeration can often be the perfect vehicle for humor.
>
> It's difficult to prescribe comedy from the outside - to try and lead you to something funny - because humor usually comes organically from the inside. In the end, if you can help make some of us laugh or smile, you will have done a great thing.

- Next up: what is the format for your comic digital story? Below are just a handful of formats to consider using to shape your story.  Take a look and consider spending time watching, with your team, several programs that model one of the formats below or other comic formats to which your team is drawn. Choose your narrative format.

> Stand-Up Comedy – Write up your two-minute routine; practice it; costume yourself; press record and go. You can even cut in a laugh track if you'd like.
> Late Night Comedy - "Weekend Update" from SNL and "The Daily Show" are news formats where the anchors or TV hosts sit behind a desk and riff on the news.
> Sketch Comedy – Write a comic sketch that begins by identifying a truth that we will all recognize. Then exaggerate or parody that truth. Here's another approach: think of the TV programs or YouTube videos that you think are funniest and use those programs as models.

> Vlogs – This format allows you to simply set up your camera and talk directly to the camera about your comic observations. It's like a monologue. Of course, with you in the foreground, you may want to add some funny background antics to help amplify the humor.
>
> Mockumentary – There are many ways to deliver a mock interview for comic effect. Choose your style and run with it.

- Write a draft of your comedy. One of the unusual things about comedy is that the ***writing*** and the ***delivery*** of the comedy are deeply intertwined. This is because comedy is often not wholly dependent on words, but demands visual antics, perfect timing, and/or unusual facial expressions, for example. In short: good comedy needs to be both verbal *and* visual. As you draft, keep reading aloud and rehearsing in order to maximize the comic impact.
  - Character and Voice – Who is delivering this material? Are your characters supposed to be everyday peers who deliver your script deadpan, as if they don't know they are being funny? Or are they fully developed characters? Are their voices normal or character voices? Keep in mind that 'character' is an important tool at your disposal to deliver your story.
  - Music and Sound Effects – Be sure to experiment with the integration of music and sound effects to amplify your comedy. As you are watching comic models for your story, pay close attention to how those models incorporate sound to add another dimension to their comedy.
  - ***Teacher's Option*: First Draft Script –** Teachers may require that teams hand in a first draft script for review and feedback, inclusive of three or four visual stage directions.
- Finalize your draft.

**During Phase III, student teams will:**
- Pre-produce the scene:
  - Scout locations for shooting;
  - Create costumes, props and other set pieces, as needed;
  - Prepare the logistics for the actual shooting of your comic piece; and
  - Rehearse the scene…a couple more times.
- Shoot the video.
- Edit the video, adding stills and graphics as desired.

- Post-produce the video, adding music and sound effects as desired.

# Meridian Support Resources

*Meridian Stories* provides two forms of support for the student teams:

1. <u>Meridian Innovators and Artists</u> – This is a series of three-to-four-minute videos featuring artists and innovative professionals who offer important advice, specifically for Meridian Stories, in the areas of creativity and production.
2. <u>Media Resource Collection</u> – These are short documents that offer student teams key tips in the areas of creativity, production, game design and digital citizenry.

Recommended review, as a team, for this Challenge include:

| Meridian Innovators and Artists | Media Resource Collection |
|---|---|
| *Scriptwriting and Comedy* – Kent Pierce<br>*Directing Comedy* – Davis Robinson<br><br>*Interviewing Techniques* – Tom Pierce<br><br>*Acting for Film and Stage* – Janet McTeer | **Creative Brainstorming Techniques**<br><br>**Building Characters**<br><br>**Producing – Tips for the Shoot**<br><br>**Conducting an Interview** |

# Presentation of Learning

Meridian Stories is a proud partner of the non-profit **Share Your Learning**, which is spearheading the movement of over **five million** students to publicly share their work as a meaningful part of their educational experience.

The workforce considers Presentational Skills to be a key asset and we encourage you to allow students to practice this skill set as often as possible. These short digital stories provide a great opportunity for kids to practice their public presentational skills.

According to *Share Your Learning*, Presentations of Learning (POL) promote…

- **Student Ownership, Responsibility & Engagement**. POLs can serve as a powerful *rite of passage* at the end of [a project]. By reflecting on their growth over time in relation to academic and character goals, grounded in evidence from their work, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning. Just as an artist wants their portfolio to represent their best work, POLs encourage students to care deeply about the work they will share.
- **Community Pride & Involvement**. When peers, teachers and community members come together to engage with student work and provide authentic feedback, they become invested in students' growth and serve as active contributors to the school community.
- **Equity**. POLs ensure that all students are seen and provide insight into what learning experiences students find most meaningful and relevant to their lives.

Meridian Stories' own research indicates this to be a really useful exercise for one additional reason: Students actually learn from their peers' presentations – it is useful to hear a perspective that is not just the teacher's.

It is with this in mind that we you encourage you to plan an event – it could be just an end-of-the-week class or an event where parents, teachers and student peers are invited – to allow the students to showcase their Meridian Stories projects. For more free resources that will support this planning, visit Share Your Learning.

# Evaluation Rubric – *Finding Humor Amidst Darkness: A Comedy*

| CONTENT COMMAND | |
|---|---|
| Criteria | 1-10 |
| **The Comedy** | The creative premise successfully yields new insights into the issue through comedy. And, …you made us laugh. |
| **The Format** | The choice of narrative format is well designed to deliver comedy and substantive content |
| **The Content** | The choice of issue, as well as the angle into the issue that was selected, is appropriately anxiety-inducing and societally relevant |

| STORYTELLING COMMAND | |
|---|---|
| Criteria | 1-10 |

| Character Creation/ Dialogue | The characters – and the words they speak - are compelling and perfectly suited to the situation |
| --- | --- |
| Visualization | The overall visualization of the story – including props, costuming, setting and graphics – are thoughtfully curated and well suited to the tone and content of your story |
| Audience Connection | Your digital story reflects universal qualities that invites the audience to emotionally and intellectually connect |

## MEDIA COMMAND

| Criteria | 1-10 |
| --- | --- |
| Directing | The direction – camera movements, angles, and character blocking – enhance our connection to the digital story |
| Sound Design | Sound effects and music are used to create an engaging listening experience and enhance the humor |
| Editing and Pacing | The video is edited cleanly and paced effectively, resulting in an engaging and funny digital storytelling experience |

## HUMAN SKILLS COMMAND (teachers only)

| Criteria | 1-10 |
| --- | --- |
| Collaborative Thinking | The group demonstrated flexibility in making compromises and valued the contributions of each group member. |
| Creativity and Innovation | The group brainstormed many inventive ideas and was able to evaluate, refine and implement them effectively. |
| Initiative and Self-Direction | The group set attainable goals, worked independently, and managed their time effectively, demonstrating a disciplined commitment to the project. |

# Essential Questions

1. What are some of the pressing societal issues that are creating this sense that we are currently living in some very stressful and challenging times?
2. What is comedy, and why can it be an essential tool to both alleviate anxiety and open new pathways into understanding complex issues?
3. How does one create effective comedy and what is the role of personal or character voice in that creative process?

4. How has immersion in the creation of original content and the production of digital media – exercising one's creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy skills - deepened the overall educational experience?
5. How has working on a team – practicing one's collaborative skills - changed the learning experience?

# Student Proficiencies

1. The student will gain a deeper understanding of a current, potent societal issue that is shaping the way humanity – and by extension, the student - thinks and behaves.
2. The student will explore a variety of comic styles as a means to address issues of societal substance.
    a. The student will have a visceral understanding of the key elements involved in creating comedy.
3. The student will expand upon his/her/their own voice and narrative powers through the art of comedy.
4. The student will utilize key Human Skills, with a focus on creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy, in their process of translating a challenging societal issue into a comic narrative.
5. The student will have an increased awareness of the challenges and rewards of team collaboration. Collaboration – the ability to work with others - is considered one of the most important Human Skills to develop in students as they prepare for life after secondary school.

# Curricular Correlations

The *Finding Humor Amidst Darkness* Challenge addresses a range of curricular objectives that have been articulated by the **Common Core Curricular Standards – English Language Arts.** Below please find the standards that are addressed, either wholly or in part.

## Common Core Curricular Standards – English Language Arts

|  | 5<sup>th</sup> Grade | 8<sup>th</sup> Grade | 9<sup>th</sup> - 10th Grade | 11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> Grade |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **W3** | Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or | Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or | Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or | Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or |

|   | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
|   | events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. | events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. | events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. | events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. |
| **W4** | Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. | Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. | Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. | Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. |
| **W5** | With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach. | With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed. | Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. | Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. |
| **W7** | Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic. | Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration. | Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation. | Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SL1** | Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 5 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. | Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. | Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. | Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. |
| **SL5** | Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, sound) and visual displays in presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes. | Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest. | Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest. | Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest. |
| **SL6** | Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, using formal English when appropriate to task and situation. | Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. | Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. | Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. |
| **L3** | Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening. | Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening. | Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. | Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. |

| L5 | Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. | Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. | Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. | Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. |
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