



**FUNNY MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD**  
Education Resource

## **Melbourne International Comedy Festival's Class Clowns program**



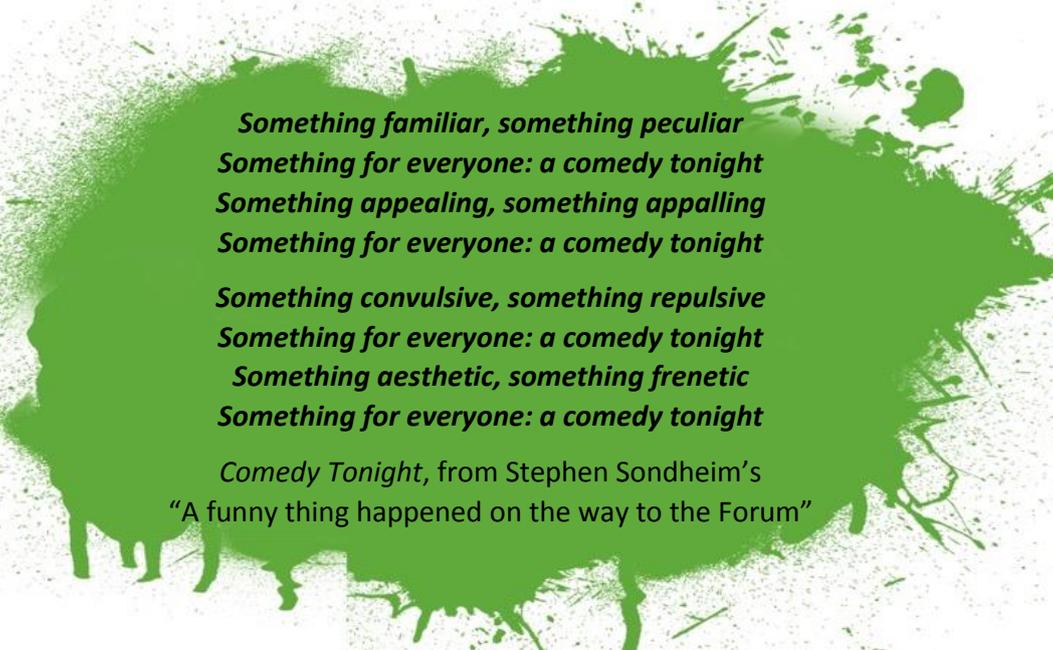
MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL  
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*Something familiar, something peculiar*  
*Something for everyone: a comedy tonight*  
*Something appealing, something appalling*  
*Something for everyone: a comedy tonight*  
  
*Something convulsive, something repulsive*  
*Something for everyone: a comedy tonight*  
*Something aesthetic, something frenetic*  
*Something for everyone: a comedy tonight*  
  
*Comedy Tonight, from Stephen Sondheim's*  
*"A funny thing happened on the way to the Forum"*

### Why an education resource?

Making comedy and making people laugh is the ultimate education. In the process of thinking about and creating a comic routine/show you use critical thinking, you engage with audiences as you try out those ideas. You write, you improvise, you consider intercultural understanding (different cultures can find different things funny...or not), and consider what might offend or be appropriate. You might want to satirise or subvert common understandings, you engage with BIG ideas and consider who you are in this crazy world. You make art and you perform art.

But wait, there's more...when you engage with comedy you actually have to think about your sense of self, your identity, who you are and what you have to say. You ask others to listen to your ideas and stories, you take risks, you build confidence, you dare to fail, dare to be brave, you laugh and you cry with laughter. Through making comedy you recognise that while life can occasionally pose challenges, it can also be awesome, especially when things are hilarious.

Curriculum links? At the end of this resource is a comprehensive table that draws links between the activities and learning in these resources to the Australian Curriculum, and also to senior curricula around the country. Teachers are encouraged to select and apply these links as appropriate.

### What's in this resource?

In this resource you will find:

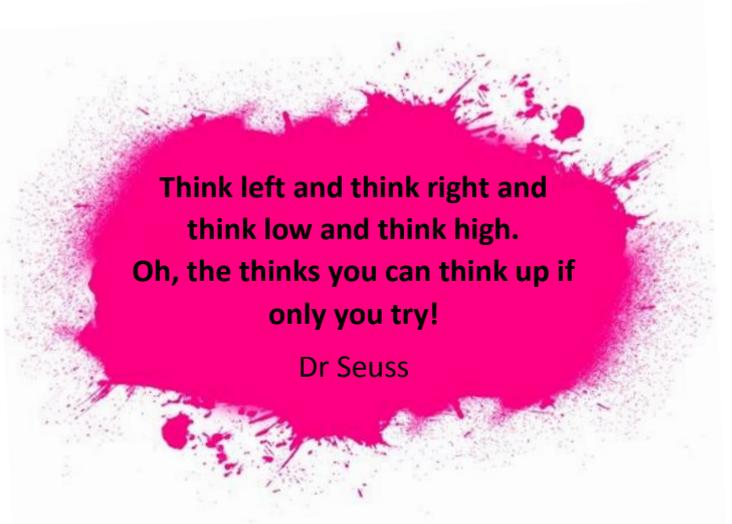
- The aim of Class Clowns
- Definitions of comedy, humour, funny and laughter – feel free to agree or disagree with them
- How funny and being funny makes you feel good and builds self-esteem
- How key **headspace** goals fit into creating, making and performing comedy...and vice versa
- How the *Class Clowns* program relates to the Australian curriculum for Years 9-10 and senior Drama syllabi in Australian States and Territories
- A brief history of Western-European comedy with links to examples
- An overview of contemporary comedy styles and practices with links to examples
- Introduction activities for getting into comedy, ones that explore a range of comic forms
- Post workshop activities to build on students' ideas, encourage them to write, rehearse and refine their comedy routines
- Links to visual resources and recent articles that are all about comedy

**NOTE: If you find links are broken or don't open – please contact us!**

## About *Class Clowns*:

### *Class Clowns* aims to:

- Help young people develop their comic writing and performance skills
- Provide recognition and exposure of budding comedy talent
- Enable young people to work with and learn from professional comedians
- Build appreciative comedy audiences for the future



## Comedy and mental health

This resource is designed for students in Years 9-12 and also for their teachers. It has been created as a basis for exploring comedy, making comedy and performing comedy. It has also been designed to connect with some of the key ideas promoted by **headspace**, the National Youth Mental Health Foundation.

*Class Clowns* has a long history of helping young people become comedians. **headspace** has a history of offering wellbeing support and mental health services to young people. Both organisations believe laughter and comedy enable young people to develop a positive outlook on life and build their self-esteem. It's a win-win.

## headspace – helpful tips

There are a number of ways young people can look after and maintain their mental health and wellbeing. **headspace** encourages young people to:

- Get informed
- Set goals
- Build self-esteem
- Seek help
- Build strategies
- Practice positive self-talk
- Relax, and
- Exercise

The *Class Clowns* program enables young people to set goals, build self-esteem, practice positive self-talk, relax and “exercise” their mind and sense of humour.

## Laughter is the best medicine

### Who said this?

Humour is infectious...but better than a cold. Laughter brings us together. Did you know when you laugh you improve your health, boost your energy and reduce stress – it's true. Laughter is also free, fun and easy to use.

## Three good tips about laughing

When you laugh you CAN'T feel anxious or angry or sad. Laughter reduces your stress and anxiety. Laughter and humour allow you to see things from a more positive and realistic perspective.

## Welcome to comedy

Sometimes people think of comedy as just people being silly but comedy is really one of the most important human activities. Comedy serves a very important role in human society. It makes us not accept things too readily. It makes us question authority by daring to be irreverent. It makes us see ourselves and others from a new angle, it reveals things we haven't thought of before. It helps us to understand what it is to be alive, to suffer, to be human. Yes, comedy is a serious business.

### Defining comedy

Comedy is an ancient and noble art. From the time of the ancient Greeks, right up to the present time, two types of drama/performance have been recognised - tragedy and comedy - both of which have always been regarded as being *equally* important. Tragedy and comedy are sometimes said to be *two sides of the same coin*. The difference between them is not **what** they deal with, but **how** they deal with it. Both deal with ideas such as love and hate, ambition and failure, trust, betrayal, lust, greed, delusion, hate, conspiracy, weakness, betrayal and death, but, while tragedy invites us to look upon these aspects of human behaviour with grief, comedy invites us to **laugh** at them.

Contemporary definitions of comedy are perhaps less nuanced or detailed than this. Online dictionaries...where would we be without them...state that COMEDY is:

- Anything that makes you laugh
- The best medicine
- What keeps everyone happy

**?** QUESTION: Do you agree with this definition? What's missing?

### Comedy – all things to all people?

The opening number of the smash hit Broadway musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is entitled *Comedy Tonight*. In this song Stephen Sondheim's lyrics describe comedy as something that is:

**Familiar, peculiar, appealing, appalling, convulsive, repulsive, aesthetic and frenetic**

- Discuss these words. Can comedy be all these things?
- At the same time? At different times?
- What would be an example of each of these types of comedy?

Watch the clip of [Comedy Tonight here](#)

### Defining humour

According to similar dictionary sites **HUMOUR** is what makes you laugh or be happy.

**?** QUESTION: Discuss what you think the difference is between the term "comedy" and the term "humour"? Is there a difference?

***A day without laughter is a day wasted***  
Charlie Chaplin, comedian and silent film star

## What's a comedian?

A comedian is someone who tells jokes...for a living. Becoming one requires great practice and skills. Being a funny person does not mean you will automatically be a good comedian. Many people who are hilarious in everyday life wouldn't make good comedians and many good comedians aren't funny at all in real life.

A natural sense of humour is a good start but perhaps the most important requirements to be a good comedian are intelligence, style, timing, commitment and a healthy dose of courage!

## What is "good" comedy? What is "bad" comedy?

Making people laugh is not that difficult. You can get a laugh by throwing a pie in someone's face. That doesn't necessarily mean it is good comedy.

**Good comedy** is original. It makes us laugh at something we may not have laughed at before. Good comedy makes us realise something is funny for the first time. There is skill in making good comedy.

**Bad comedy** is comedy that makes fun of things we already know. Bad comedy tells old jokes or it makes fun of easy targets. A way to consider the difference between good and bad comedy is:

Good comedy is irreverent	Bad comedy is offensive
Good comedy is clever	Bad comedy is someone just trying to be smart
Good comedy makes you laugh	Bad comedy makes you groan
Good comedy takes a lot of work	Bad comedy takes the easy way out
Good comedy tries to be fresh/new	Bad comedy uses old formulas
Good comedy is unique/original	Bad comedy is lame

## Let's explore the idea of good and bad comedy further...How far is 'too far'?

### (Critical Thinking)

**Split up into pairs. Read one or both of the following two articles**

#### **Article 1: [What is good comedy? The answer probably depends on your social background](#)**

Read this article from online publication, The Conversation, about what we laugh at and why.

#### **Article 2: [The dark psychology of being a good comedian](#)**

From The Atlantic, an article that discusses what makes "good humour"

*Psychologist Peter McGraw has a long-held theory that comedy is equal parts darkness and light. The best jokes, he believes, take something awful and make it silly. Go purely light-hearted and you risk being toothless. Too edgy, and ... you'll make people uncomfortable.*

**Discuss some of the ideas that the articles offer up about comedy.**

- What is GOOD COMEDY? What does the article say about being a comedian?
- What points do the articles make about comedy that is offensive?
- Which points do you agree with and which ones don't you agree with? Why?
- Do you think that comedy can go 'too far'? When do you draw the line?
- What do these articles tell you about your own sense of humour and comic style?

## What the reviewers think about comedy

Imagine being a reviewer for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival! Sounds amazing. You would get to see a whole lot of shows and write about them. Hang on a sec. You would also need to be pretty good at determining what makes good comedy and what makes you and others laugh. Possibly not as easy as it may seem? Maybe being a comedy review writer is a comic act in itself? The following are headlines of reviews from the 2015 Festival:

Fast and fearless hunter of funny	Whips up whimsy overload
Join forces in “nerdery”	Cultivates gloom
Trip to the dark side	Traditional and modern
On a roll in engaging riff on day job	Serves up a surreal tour de force
Delivers shtick and chills	Deliriously silly
Antics subvert expectation	A giggle generator
The purest form of comedy	With a sting in the tail
Deadpan bordering on absurd	Has audiences in stitches

### What’s in a word? (Literacy)

Work in pairs and pick three of the above headlines.

- Discuss with your partner what the key words are in each headline.
- What do you imagine as you read and say the headline?
- What sort of comedy does the headline suggest about the routine involved? CREATE THE ROUTINE!
- How might you create a parody similar to *At the Movies/The Movie Show* where you review comedy routines/shows? [[Click here for an example](#)]

### FOLLOW UP

Watch the following clip from [A Bit of Fry and Laurie](#) (Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie) entitled [Critics](#).

### FOLLOW UP: Reviews and media about the 2015 Melbourne Comedy Festival

Want to know what makes reviewers laugh?

Follow these links to read how comedy and comedians are reviewed and written about:

[The Age](#) [[theage.com.au/entertainment/comedy/reviews](http://theage.com.au/entertainment/comedy/reviews)]

[Herald Sun](#) [[heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/comedy-festival/comfest-reviews](http://heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/comedy-festival/comfest-reviews)]

[ArtsHub](#)

## Comedy is an age of diversity

What makes good comedy and bad comedy in a diverse country like Australia? And not just in terms of cultural diversity but diversity in all its guises – culture, gender, (dis) ability, economic, and social. Australian comedian, Stella Young, who sadly passed away in December 2014, was a passionate advocate for the rights of people who identified as having a disability. Stella’s use of comedy was dark, political and satirical, sometimes uncomfortable and very funny. Stella used comedy to draw attention to what it means to be a person living with a disability. She drew on personal experiences and observations of the world around her. Importantly, Stella Young’s use of comedy made her audiences really think.

[Watch a stand-up routine by Stella here](#) (Warning: a little bit of swearing...but hardly any)

*Most of my comedy is focused on the ridiculous things that happen to me because I’m a disabled person, and most of that material is from the stupid things people say to me in response to disability*

Stella Young, 2014

## Is comedy culturally sensitive or specific?

### THE FEED: Why comedy is the most multicultural genre on Australian TV

[Watch this clip from SBS's \*The Feed\*](#) (no warnings). The clip explores how comedy and comedy shows in Australia contain the strongest representation of our cultural diversity.

### WINDIANS: White people who impersonate Indians

[Watch this sketch from \*Legally Brown\* \(SBS\)](#). It uses comedy to subvert racism and cultural identity.

### SALAM CAFÉ: Working with a Muslim

[Watch this sketch from \*Salam Café\*](#) which satirises non-Muslim's response to being a Muslim.

### BLACK COMEDY: Deadly Dancer

The most recent addition to television comedy, [Black Comedy](#) is an Indigenous comedy show that explores humour and comedy from an Indigenous perspective, [this clip uses comedy to explore Indigenous dance](#).

### INDIGENOUS COMEDIANS – Kevin Kropinyeri & Andy Saunders

Watch these two great comedians at: [Kevin Kropinyeri's website](#) and [Andy Saunders on YouTube](#).

### FAST FORWARD – Lynne and Carmel (Jane Turner and Magda Szubanski)

[Watch a clip here](#).

### THE LATE SHOW – The Oz Brothers (Santo Cilauro and Rob Sitch)

[Watch a clip here](#).

## What is an “Australian” sense of humour?

As a group discuss what you think are the characteristics of “the Australian sense of humour”

Is there a ‘typical’ Aussie sense of humour?

Which comedians and comic actors can you think of that represent an Australian sense of humour?

DISCUSS:

- Do you think that what makes us laugh is dependent on our culture?
- Discuss the idea of one culture making fun of another. Is this okay? When is it okay? When is it not?
- Which of the clips mentioned above made you laugh and why?

**I like to think of myself as a hot chocolate  
but the truth is I'm a mochaccino**

Kevin Kropinyeri, 2015

**Look at me basking in my  
cultural glory...affiliated in all  
things traditional!**

Andy Saunders, 2014

## What about comedy and gender diversity?

Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby shot to fame as a regular on the Adam Hills' show *In Gordon Street Tonight*. Before that and since, she has had a successful stand up career. Hannah's brand of humour speaks to gender, sexuality and even ADHD. Hannah draws her humour from lived experience and, like Stella Young, from others' comments and reactions to her.

 **LINK:** Clip from [Kiss me Quick I'm Full of Jubes](#)  
(Warning - a tiny bit of strong language – but not much)

Australian comedian Josh Thomas was the youngest ever winner of RAW Comedy at Melbourne Comedy Festival in 2005. He was just 17. Josh has gone on to have a successful stand up career and was a panel member of the television show *Talkin' bout my Generation*. Josh wrote and created a comedy sitcom for the ABC entitled *Please Like Me*. It explores love, life and coming out. Josh draws his humour from real life experiences – as the best comedy does.

 **LINK:** Trailer from [Please Like Me, Series 2](#)  
(Warning – some of the content of this clip may not be considered suitable for younger students – teachers please take a look and decide)

## HISTORY OF COMEDY – THE SHORT VERSION

Here is a potted history of comedy from the ancient up to the nineteenth century – it is by no means complete but will give you some insight into how comedy has evolved in Western culture over thousands of years.

**Greek Comedy** – Aristophanes (456-386 BC) plays were satirical and targeted politicians and public figures, and even the destructiveness of war (as in his play *Lysistrata*). Plays were often full of sexual innuendo and stereotypical or 'stock' characters that were played in a highly exaggerated fashion. Masks and oversized costumes were used to help identify character types too (consider how big a Greek amphitheatre would have been – some seating tens of thousands in the audience).

**Burlesque** – stretching from 14th to 18th century in Europe this style is typically parody. The literal translation is 'to send up' and was only associated with 'striptease' in America. It used grotesque exaggeration – sometimes juxtaposing serious and comic elements in a musical work to make a point.

**Commedia Dell'Arte** – originally from the mid-16th century, the literal translation from the Italian is 'art of comedy'. Commedia Dell'Arte is a form of comedy that drew on stock characters from different classes in society – Arlecchino (the servant), Il Dottore (the doctor), Il Capitano (the captain), Pantalone (wealthy old man), Pulcinello (a servant), Brighella (a braggart) – and used a series of basic plots and scenarios. Beyond those basic stories the performances relied on improvisations or LAZZI. The open air performances (sometimes on the back of wagons in streets) were based on human themes of adultery, jealousy, old age and love.

**Comedy of Manners** – is a genre of comedy that satirizes the manners and behaviour of a social class (often the upper class), using stock or stereotypical characters. The plots focused mainly on scandal, misrepresentation, love and the foibles of those who have nothing to do except engage in these things. Comedies of Manners used witty and sometimes explicit dialogue. Perhaps the most famous Comedies of Manners were by the French playwright, Moliere (writing in the mid 17C) - *Tartuffe*, *The Imaginary Invalid* and *The Misanthrope*. In Great Britain, William Wycherley and Richard Brinsley Sheridan were the foremost writers of this form. This form of comedy was replicated in Great Britain in the latter part

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Oscar Wilde’s “society comedies” – *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*.

**Shakespearean Comedy** – from the late 1500’s to early 1600’s during the Elizabethan period focused more on situations rather than characters for the audience to laugh at. Plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* used themes of love (and difficulties thrown in lovers paths), deception or mistaken identity and always a happy ending! A classic scene from Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing* is worth a look at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AIFkbElh44>

**Music Hall and Variety** – Victorian England saw the rise of theatres and in particular music hall and variety shows. Music hall and variety was just that, a series of musical numbers and comedy sketches/routines performed while people ate and drank. This form of comedy often had bawdy overtones and the audiences were not always well behaved.

**Vaudeville** – a popular form of theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Vaudeville shows featured magicians, jugglers, singers, dancers, acrobats, animals and comedy acts. Like Music Hall and Variety of the Victorian era, the audiences were often noisy and abusive.

### CONTEMPORARY STYLES OF COMEDY – the past 100 years

The following table offers a description of a range of contemporary comedy styles with links to examples (most are PG but please check for warnings which is usually language).

You’re encouraged to follow the links and to see as many examples of comedy styles as possible.

- Write down your favourites and why you like them
- Consider characters, style, dialogue, voices, structure, topics, stories - whatever

STYLE	DESCRIPTION	LINKS
Absurdism	A form of humour based on bizarre characters in absurd situations often with nonsense logic: Spike Milligan ( <i>The Goon Show</i> ), Ross Noble, Bill Bailey, <i>The Mighty Boosh</i> , <i>Monty Python</i> , Shaun Micallef, <i>The Goodies</i> , <i>Sam Simmons</i> , <i>Sarah Silverman</i> .	<a href="#">The Swedish chef makes meatballs from Sesame Street</a>  <a href="#">The Goodies – Bunfight at the OK Tea Rooms</a>
Black Comedy	Comedy that deals with unsettling subject matter that might normally be considered taboo – death, racism, violence, mental illness - <i>Little Britain</i> is quite a good example.	<a href="#">Little Britain – Andy &amp; Lou at the Library</a>
Character	This type of comedy generates humour from the creation of a caricature or persona e.g. Barry Humphries’ creation of Dame Edna Everage, Catherine Tate’s characters of Nan and Vicki, Rowan Atkinson’s Headmaster and Mr Bean, Kath and Kim.	<a href="#">Rowan Atkinson’s Mr Bean – Mr Bean goes Swimming</a>
Cringe	Comedy that evokes embarrassment. The humour comes from inappropriate actions or words: <i>Extras</i> , <i>Curb your Enthusiasm</i> , <i>Family Guy</i> , <i>The Office</i> , <i>The Catherine Tate Show</i>	<a href="#">Ricky Gervais’ Extras - Racist</a>

STYLE	DESCRIPTION	LINKS
Double Entendre	Comedy that uses sayings that can be understood in two different meanings – one obvious and the other more subtle e.g. If I said you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me?	<a href="#">Are you being Served? – Christmas Crackers</a>
Improvised Comedy	Drawn from Theatre Sports and Loose Moose Theatre Company, Improvised comedy live has been best exemplified by comedians devising short moments and scenes on the spur of the moment with only a title or single stimulus.	<a href="#">Whose Line is it Anyway? – Narrate</a>
Mime	Comedy based on creating reality through actions alone. The accepted convention is that the performer doesn't speak although sound effects are often used. The challenge of MIME is to create a reality on stage and to make it entertaining and amusing.	<a href="#">Magical Mime</a>  <a href="#">Trygve Wakenshaw</a>
Mockumentary	Comedy that uses the conventions of documentary style film or television: <i>Summer Heights High, The Office, Parks and Recreation, Modern Family, Angry Boys, Jamie</i> .	<a href="#">Mr G – Summer Heights High</a>
Music Comedy	This form of comedy involves the combination of song, music, story telling and wit. Proponents of this form of comedy in recent years include Bill Bailey, Sammy J and Randy, Doug Anthony All Stars, Rich Hall, Lano and Woodley, Bo Burnham, Flight of the Conchords.	<a href="#">Bill Bailey – Death Metal</a>  <a href="#">Tim Minchin – Lullaby</a>  <a href="#">Bo Burnham - Sad</a> (Warning: some language!)
Observational	Comedy that pokes fun of everyday life. The comedian focuses on small or trivial things that humans do – Billy Connolly, Ellen DeGeneres, Eddie Izzard, Kitty Flanagan, Shappie Korsandi, Sarah Millican, Stella Young, Denise Scott, Judith Lucy, and Russell Peters are some examples.	<a href="#">Eddie Izzard – The French Language</a> (Warning: some language!)  <a href="#">Shappie Korsandi – Comedy Road Show</a> (Warning: some language!)  <a href="#">Sarah Millican – Royal Variety Performance</a>
Parody	Comedy evoked from performing an imitation of something or someone. To work parody must not be just a good imitation it must also be funny (see Mockumentary above).	<a href="#">Fast Forward – Chenille and the Shopping show</a>
Physical	This is a type of slapstick (see commedia in the history section). It uses physical movement and is influenced by clowning: Jim Carrey, Jerry Lewis, Robin Williams, Lano and Woodley, Lucille Ball, The Umbilical Brothers.	<a href="#">Buster Keaton – Best of short movie</a>  <a href="#">The Umbilical Brothers</a>
Satire	Generally uses important or topical events for the purposes of generating sharp and incisive humour. It comments on the event, often criticising it or mocking it. <i>Not the Nine O'Clock News, The Games, The Hollow Men, The Chaser, Shaun Micallef's Mad as Hell, Extras, The Office, The Late Show, South Park, The Katering Show</i> .	<a href="#">The Chaser – If Life was a Musical</a>  <a href="#">The Office US – No I fired them and you're next</a>  <a href="#">The Katering Show – Season 1 (web series)</a>

STYLE	DESCRIPTION	LINKS
Sitcom	A scripted dialogue show that generally focuses on the same group of characters in each episode, tracking their interactions with each other and the world: <i>Seinfeld, Fawlty Towers, Parks and Recreation, Blackadder, Friends, The Office, The Simpsons, Modern Family, Absolutely Fabulous, The Moodies, Upper Middle Bogan, The Vicar of Dibley, 30 Rock, Will and Grace.</i>	<a href="#">Fawlty Towers – Basil gives Manuel a language lesson</a>
Sketch	A series of short comic scenes, usually between 1 and 10 minutes long. They can be performed by individuals or small groups, performed live or be part of a television sketch show: <i>French &amp; Saunders, Black Comedy, Legally Brown, Fry &amp; Laurie, Smith &amp; Jones, Mitchell &amp; Webb, Inside Amy Schumer.</i>	<a href="#">French and Saunders – Dance Academy</a> <a href="#">A Bit of Fry and Laurie – Christening Sketch</a> <a href="#">Aunty Donna - Viewing</a>
Stand up	Stand up comedy is a single comedian in front of a live audience, speaking directly to that audience. Some stand ups tell jokes, others may draw from other styles listed above e.g. Observational, physical, character.	<a href="#">2015 Melbourne International Comedy Festival</a> (NB: Some of these clips contain coarse language – double check)
Wit/Word Play	Often considered a more intellectual form of humour, often subtle, the manipulation of language to create comic effect. The plays of Oscar Wilde use wit and word play to great effect.	<a href="#">Groucho Marx</a> <a href="#">Tim Vine – the Punslinger</a> <a href="#">A Bit of Fry and Laurie – Linguistics</a>

## Limericks, Puns, One-liners, and Riddles

The following comic forms, associated with stand-up, music comedy, and sitcom may be familiar to you as well. Consider:

**Limericks** – a form of humorous poetry that has five lines

e.g: There was a Young Person of Smyrna  
Whose grandmother threatened to burn her.  
But she seized on the cat,  
and said 'Granny, burn that!  
You ridiculous old woman of Smyrna!

**Puns** – a play on words for comic effect e.g. He became a maths teacher because of some prime factors.

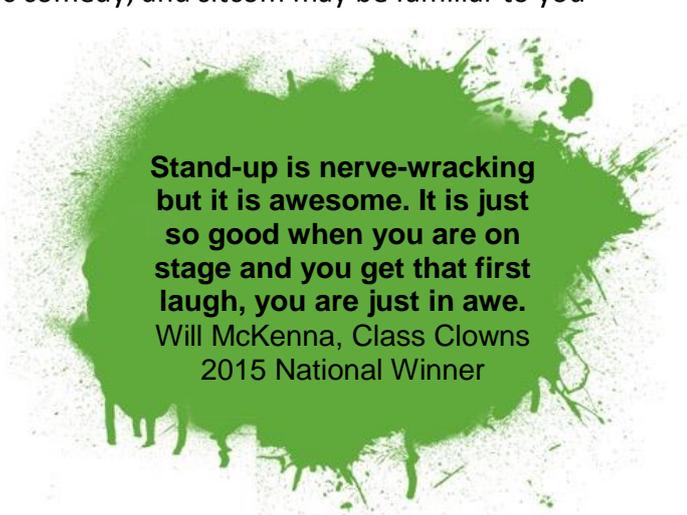
**One liners** – a joke that is delivered in a single line and needs to be short and punchy

"A baby seal walks into a club."  
"I wondered why the ball was getting bigger and then it hit me"  
"I have nothing to declare except my genius."  
"Venison's dear isn't it."

**Riddles** – a question or statement intentionally phrased so as to require ingenuity in ascertaining its answer or meaning.

Q: I'm tall when I'm young and I'm short when I'm old. What am I? A: A candle

**Don't disregard using these forms and re-inventing them for now.**



## COMEDY TODAY

Today comedy is big business and comic performers are amongst the highest paid in the entertainment industry. Actors, writers and directors have always been expected to be proficient in both serious drama and comedy but the reality is in recent years the more successful comedy performers have tended to be *specialists*.

These days, successful comic actors are more likely to have come from comedy clubs than from drama school. Robin Williams, Steve Martin, Jim Carrey, Rowan Atkinson, Ricky Gervais, Adam Sandler, Steve Carell, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders all started as improv, revue and stand-up comedians before working their way into television and films.

There is also a trend for comedians transitioning into presenter roles on television and radio too. Look at *The Project* and *The Weekly* with Charlie Pickering, *Good News Week* and *Talkin' Bout Your Generation*, and Adam Hills show *In Gordon Street Tonight* and more recently, *The Last Leg*. In the past there have also been improv shows like *Whose line is it Anyway* and *Thank God You're Here* that feature comedians.

A current trend in television comedy is the 'documentary style filming' of shows like *The Office* (both the UK and US versions), *Parks and Recreation* and *Modern Family*. It is interesting to consider what the impact is of this 'mockumentary' style where there is such a strong awareness of the audience – or as described in theatre conventions, 'breaking the fourth wall', which in a sense includes the audience by acknowledging them.

Recent television comedies such as *The Moodies*, *Upper Middle Bogan*, and *8MMM*, demonstrate the Australian audience's desire for quality comedy sitcom.

## BUILDING YOUR SKILLS - WHAT TYPE OF COMEDIAN ARE YOU?

### (Personal and Social Capability)

This section is about getting started. Begin by thinking about:

- What interests you.
- What makes you laugh.
- What abilities you have.
- What you observe about life.
- What stories you want to tell.

### 🔍 ASK YOURSELF:

- Do I enjoy transforming myself into different characters?
- Do I have the ability to use voices or accents?
- Do I have the ability to imitate famous people?
- Can I write good parodies of TV shows or funny lyrics?
- Can I write funny conversations between people?
- Can I tell funny stories about things I have seen?
- Are there things in my life that drive me crazy and I just want to send them up?
- Am I good at visual or physical comedy?
- Do I have an unusual take on things?
- Do I enjoy working solo, in pairs or in a small group?

If you can identify what it is you enjoy, then you can make a start on creating a comedy routine/sketch. We are all good at something so be honest when you consider the comments above. Acknowledge your strengths.

Comedy is also about **using technique**. Just talking about a topic usually isn't enough. You have to make it funny. There are a number of techniques which comedians use to put the comic "spin" on a topic. Most of these involve some sort of **comic exaggeration**. The following activities allow you to explore a whole range of comedy styles and techniques. Have fun...funny makes you feel good!

## WARM UP COMEDY ACTIVITIES

### (The Arts – Drama, Personal and Social Capability, Literacy)

The following are some beginning activities to explore a range of comedy styles, play with lots of ideas and build your confidence:

#### 1. Physical Comedy/Improv - I am the greatest performer in the world and this is my act!

- Group stands in a circle
- Instruction is to think of a simple “act” to perform
- Anything is possible, everything is right e.g. – waving, conducting an orchestra, moon walking, sitting on the floor crossed legged, brushing your hair, doing yoga, miming, whistling
- One at a time each person comes in and says: I am the greatest performer in the world and this is my act!
- They perform their act and bow
- The group gives thunderous applause
- Next person comes in etc.
- Skills: improv, absurdity, physicality, risk, trust

#### 2. Parody – The Shopping Channel Presents

- Brainstorm the types of products that home shopping channels sell
- Discuss the ‘types’ of presenters who sell products on these channels – a great opportunity to play with caricature, accent and physicality
- Brainstorm a whole heap of products that would be completely ridiculous to sell
- In pairs select a ridiculous product to sell – skateboards for dogs/cats/rabbits
- Create a parody of a shopping channel advertisement selling the most ridiculous product possible with the most ridiculous presenters possible
- Remember the rules of Good Comedy!

 **Links:** In the 1960s and 1970s a company called K-tel was a pioneer in television shopping. They used television to sell some rather interesting products. Check these out:

[Hair Magician](#)

[Record Selector](#)

[Car cleaner, glass cleaner, wonder cutter](#)

#### 3. Finish this line

Using the oldest joke – Why did the chicken cross the road – work in pairs or small groups of 3 to 4 and generate ridiculous answers: It was the Lollypop Lady’s day off, Red Rooster closed down, It needed a change, The sign said walk, Chicken’s don’t need to explain etc.

#### 4. WHAT IF?

Often a good way to create a comic routine is to ask the question WHAT IF?

- What if you were at a party and gravity suddenly stopped existing?
- What if super heroes were the nightly news reporters?
- What if you were at a wedding and the priest is the groom/bride?
- What if you were at a supermarket and see your lost pet dog with a new owner?
- What if you were at school, you open your lunch box and find a bloodied dagger inside?
- What if you on a tram/bus/train and you get a text from an unknown number saying, “Get off the tram/bus/train immediately”?
- What if you are in the bath and your rubber duckie takes on murderous tendencies?
- What if you are in the science lab at school and the floor becomes lava?
- What if you are on the footy field and the goal posts keep shifting?

- What if all the adults in your life suddenly acted like small children?
- What if your take-away meal suddenly began to speak to you?

Work solo, in pairs or in a small group and create one of these scenes

## 5. Personification/characters

In this activity you imagine what it would be like if inanimate objects were alive and indeed had lives! How would they speak? How would they move? Improvise a short scene in pairs or small groups where the objects/items that live in one of the following environments are alive.

- The fridge
- Laundry cupboard
- Stationery aisle
- Vegetable bin
- Undies department
- The bathroom
- Party supplies

**Some plot lines:** A crime has been committed, A job interview, A messy love scene, A funeral



Examples:

[Talking animals](#)

[The Pajama Men](#)

## 6. Extremes

Use the following starters to create a highly exaggerated or extreme example.

- Have you ever noticed how restaurants now cater for all sorts of allergies these days? I found one that catered for my allergy to food/customers...
- You can buy anything online now – shoes, clothes, music, furniture, holidays...why the other day I ordered a new body part...GST free

## 7. Changing contexts:

Sometimes we can show how strange certain behaviour is by moving it into a different context.

Considering again the “what if” idea...what if the following professions spoke and acted at home exactly like they did at work?

- Police officer, model, sports coach, newsreader, surgeon, auctioneer, teacher, orchestra conductor, court judge

## 8. The unexpected turn

A joke/comic routine can work by creating an expectation and then turning it around for example:

The first school I went to was very rough. They were punching each other in the playground, setting fire to the buildings, slashing car tyres...and that was the *teachers!*

Below is a sketch that works by taking off in an unexpected direction.

### **POLICE PHOTOGRAPHER.**

*A rough looking bloke enters and stands against a police line-up wall with height markings on it. A uniformed Police Photographer is standing in front with a camera on a tripod.*

PHOTOGRAPHER: Okay, stand against the wall.

*The crim stands against the wall.*

PHOTOGRAPHER: Hold up the sign.

*The crim holds up the card with a number on it. The camera flashes.*

PHOTOGRAPHER: Now turn to your right.

*cont.*

*The crim turns in profile. The camera flashes again.*  
 PHOTOGRAPHER: Turn your head towards the camera.  
*The crim turns his head slightly. The camera flashes again.*  
 PHOTOGRAPHER: Drop your shoulder.  
*The crim, drops his shoulder.*  
 PHOTOGRAPHER: No, tougher, look tougher.  
*The crim snarls.*  
 PHOTOGRAPHER: That's good. That's good. And again. Even tougher. Really snarl. Yes, that's great. Now clench your fists. That's fantastic. That's beautiful.  
*The photographer takes the camera off the tripod and starts moving around the room taking dozens of photos as the crim poses in different positions. It is like a fashion shoot for a magazine.*  
 PHOTOGRAPHER: Just drop the shoulder, and chin up and...beautiful, and give me sinister, really sinister, good and more creepy, sneer, sneer like you've just bashed someone, fantastic...gorgeous!

What other understood situations can you think of that might take unexpected turns?

## 9. Commedia/Slapstick – Lazzi

Re-read the description of Commedia Dell'Arte offered earlier in this resource. For this activity you don't need to be overly familiar with the form but keep in mind that most of the comedy arises from the master/servant roles (status), the servant always trying to trick the master, the master not necessarily being on the ball. It uses exaggerated caricature, accents, physical theatre and slapstick.

In pairs or small groups select one of the following LAZZO (singular of Lazzi) to plan, rehearse and perform.

### Innocent Bystander Lazzo

Arlecchino and Pedrolino meet each other face-to-face and are armed to the teeth. They heap abuse on each other, relying on others to hold them back physically. Finally, when the Captain seeks to separate them, they strike out at each other with the Captain receiving most of the blows.

### Lazzo of the Foreign Language

In the inn Arlecchino thinks he has met a foreign nobleman and pretends he can speak the nobleman's language. He begins to converse by using made-up words or words associated with whatever culture the made-up nobleman is supposed to have come from. ("Dirka-dirka michimarkus scaramoocchery). He then gives ridiculous and improbable translations for these phrases to the inn keeper AND attempts to translate the Nobleman's responses.

### Tasting Lazzo

A zanni/servant is cooking a pot of something for dinner. He continually seasons the dish, then tastes it, then adds more seasoning, tastes again, and this goes on until there is no food left in the pot! The master enters and the servant has to improvise.

### Cherries Lazzo

While Scapino is speaking, Arlecchino shows his indifference by taking imaginary cherries out of his hat, eating them, and throwing the pits at Scapino. It takes some time for Scapino to respond. A chase ensues.

### Lying Lazzo

A Zanni makes up lies and more lies to his/her master/mistress to explain why he/she is late. Each is more stupid than the last. Incredibly, the stupidest lie he/she thinks of is what convinces the master/mistress.

### **Fire Lazzo**

At the beginning of the meal, Arlecchino arrives in a panic, saying that the kitchen is on fire. Don Juan and all his friends run off stage to the kitchen. In the meantime, Arlecchino sits down and eats all he can. When the others return complaining that there was no fire, Arlecchino replies: "I said THE kitchen was on fire. I didn't mean YOUR kitchen was on fire." A chase/punishment ensues.

[Adapted from: <https://sites.google.com/site/italiancommedia/lazzi>]

### **10. Absurd – the chair re-arranging activity**

Resources: 10-12 classroom chairs

- Have the chairs set in the space in any arrangements
- Halve the group – one participating, the others watching
- Students stand on the edges of the space on two sides
- One at a time they are invited to enter the space and move/reposition just ONE CHAIR and then return to the side
- It must remain in the space but can be moved anyway they like and positioned anyway they like – simple or complex, absurd or ridiculous
- Increase this to 2 or 3 students at the one time – what happens if they choose the same chair?
- Then use the whole group, all at once, within perhaps a time limit.
- What did the audience observe? What was comic? Why?
- Swap over and repeat with the other group
- Discuss how simple, mundane activities can have great comic effect
- Additions – move the chair with haste, as if in love, with suspicion, obsessively, casually

### **11. More Absurd – the language activity**

We are all aware that different professions use what we call JARGON – words, phrases, acronyms and terminology that is unique to what they do. People who work in Information Technology or IT say stuff like: RAM, byte, hard disk, ISP, OS, www, interface, cookie, phishing, router, surfer, zombie, worm, and hacker. Surfers talk about stuff like barrel, ding, cutback, phazer, point break, ripping, zipper, nose, pipeline, pumping, radical, shacked, shubie etc. Consider the language of other subgroups that you know.

Imagine that you are a brand new social group or profession within society that has its own unique language. Make up a name for that social/sub group or profession. It can be absurd and quite ridiculous. It can be influenced by any comedy shows/routines you have seen e.g. Pancake-eans – those people who are experts in making pancakes; Topiareans – those people who practice topiary (shaping bushes and trees into creatures or shapes), High-heel-eans – those who practice the art of wearing and walking in high heels; or a completely made up group.

In your group create as many words or phrases you can think of that may be used by the new group. Improvise a short scene that uses only these words/phrases/terms. Try to keep it as TRUTHFUL or AUTHENTIC as possible – as if it could really happen. Present the scene to an audience.

- Did the audience laugh? Why/why not?
- What was challenging about this task?
- Absurd comedy can still offer a message or make a comment on the human condition even if it seems completely ridiculous – do you agree?
- What message does/could this activity offer?

## 12. Scripts

Comedy scripts allow you to explore character, dialogue, one-liners, physicality, absurdity and narrative. The following links take you to some classic British scripts from the Monty Python team and to some of the signature performance from Rowan Atkinson's live performances and also to a script by comedy duo Abbott and Costello, *Who's on first?*



### Monty Python scripts

[\*The argument script\*](#)

[\*Hitting on the head script\*](#)

[\*Inspector Flying Fox script\*](#)

[\*Merchant banker script\*](#)



### Rowan Atkinson scripts ([various scripts](#))

[\*Welcome to Hell script\*](#)



### Abbott and Costello

[\*Who's on first?\*](#)

## THINGS TO AVOID WHEN CREATING YOUR COMEDY ROUTINE

- **In-jokes** - Only understood by a small group of people and not a broader audience.
- **Cheap shots** - A joke made at the expense of an easy target who can't defend themselves, someone who doesn't deserve to have a joke made about them.
- **Old jokes** - Avoid jokes that everyone has heard before.
- **Offensive content** - There is an art in being provocative without being offensive. Good comedians can make fun without making people angry.

## CLASS CLOWNS AND THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Linking the *Class Clowns* program to the Australian Curriculum is a neat way of allowing teachers to embed comedy and well-being into curriculum development and school learning programs. The following table is adapted from two key ACARA documents: The Arts – Drama, and the General Capabilities.

Learning Area/Subject	Content Description – Years 9 and 10
<p><b><u>The Arts - Drama</u></b></p>	<p>ACADRM047 – Improvise with elements of drama and narrative structure to develop ideas and explore subtext to shape drama - <b>USING COMEDY!</b></p> <p>ACADRM048 – Manipulate combinations of the elements of drama to develop and convey the physical and psychological aspects of roles and characters – <b>USING COMEDY!</b></p> <p>ACADRM049 – Practise and refine the expressive capacity of voice and movement to communicate ideas and dramatic action in a range of forms, styles and performance spaces - <b>INCLUDING COMEDY!</b></p> <p>ACADRM050 – Structure drama to engage an audience through manipulation of dramatic action, forms and performance styles – <b>AS A COMIC PERFORMER.</b></p>
<p><b><u>General Capability: Personal &amp; Social Capability</u></b></p> <p><b>Self Awareness</b></p> <p><b>Self Management</b></p> <p><b>Social Awareness</b></p> <p><b>Social Management</b></p>	<p><b><u>Learning Continuums – Years 9 and 10</u></b></p> <p>Considering, creating and performing <b>Comedy</b> can allow students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect critically on emotional responses to challenging situations in a wide range of learning, social and work related contexts</li> <li>• Assess their strengths and challenges (<b>my comedy works</b>) and devise appropriate strategies to achieve future success</li> <li>• Reflect on feedback from peers and adults to analyse personal characteristics that contribute to social capability (<b>and the comedy routine</b>)</li> <li>• Consider, control and justify opinions, beliefs, values, and choices</li> <li>• Establish personal priorities, manage resources effectively and demonstrate initiative to achieve personal goals and learning outcomes (<b>create a comedy routine</b>)</li> <li>• Evaluate ways to contribute to civil society at local, regional, national and global levels – THINK BIG!</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>General Capability: Intercultural Understanding</u></b></p> <p><b>Recognising culture and developing respect</b></p> <p><b>Interacting and empathising with others</b></p> <p><b>Reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility</b></p>	<p><b><u>Learning Continuums – Years 9 and 10</u></b></p> <p>Considering, creating and performing <b>Comedy</b> can allow students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand how local, regional, national and international groups shape their identities (<b>is comedy culturally specific?</b>)</li> <li>• Analyse the complex relationship between language, thought and context to understand and enhance communication (<b>considering what is appropriate comedy for certain cultural audiences</b>)</li> <li>• Understand the importance of mutual respect in promoting cultural exchange and collaboration (<b>working in groups to create those comedy routines</b>)</li> <li>• Recognise the effect that empathising with others has on your own feelings, motivations and actions (<b>consider your audience too</b>)</li> <li>• Reflect critically on the effect of intercultural experiences on your attitudes, beliefs and those of others (<b>is what makes you laugh the same as what makes others’ laugh – is that important?</b>)</li> <li>• Critique the use of stereotypes and prejudices in texts and issues concerning specific cultural groups (<b>a brilliant offer for developing a comedy routine!</b>)</li> </ul>

Learning Area/Subject	Content Description – Years 9 and 10
<p><b><u>General Capability: Critical Thinking</u></b>  <b>Inquiring</b>  <b>Generating ideas</b>  <b>Reflecting</b>  <b>Analysing</b>  <b>Synthesising</b>  <b>Reasoning</b></p>	<p><b><u>Learning Continuum – Years 9 and 10</u></b>  Considering, creating and performing <b>Comedy</b> can allow students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pose questions to critically analyse complex issues and abstract ideas (<b>what ideas can I use for my routine?</b>)</li> <li>• Clarify complex information and ideas drawn from a range of sources (<b>explore many different comedy styles</b>)</li> <li>• Create and connect complex ideas using imagery, analogies and symbolism (<b>maybe satire?</b>)</li> <li>• Speculate on creative options to modify ideas when circumstances change (<b>like audiences!</b>)</li> <li>• Assess risks (<b>content!</b>) and explain contingencies (<b>new content</b>) taking account of a range of perspectives</li> <li>• Give reasons to support their thinking</li> <li>• Identify, plan and justify transference of current knowledge to new contexts</li> <li>• Evaluate the effectiveness of ideas, products, performances and implement courses of action to achieve the desired outcome (<b>make the audience laugh!</b>)</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>General Capability: Literacy</u></b>  <b>Text knowledge</b>  <b>Grammar knowledge</b>  <b>Word knowledge</b>  <b>Visual knowledge</b></p>	<p><b><u>Learning Continuum – Years 9 and 10</u></b>  Considering, creating and performing <b>Comedy</b> can allow students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehend texts through listening, reading and viewing (<b>reading scripts, watching and listening to comedy routines</b>)</li> <li>• Compose texts through speaking, writing and creating (<b>writing, reading, rehearsing the comedy routine</b>)</li> <li>• Interpreting, analysing and evaluation</li> <li>• Interacting with others</li> <li>• Expressing and developing ideas</li> </ul>

Source:

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/generalcapabilities/pdf/overview>

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/the-arts/drama/learning-in-drama>

The following tables make links to senior drama curriculums around the country. Where it says “drama” feel free to use the term “comedy”.

### VICTORIA: Victorian Certificate of Education – Drama

Drama	Area of Study	Outcome
Unit 1 – Dramatic Story Telling	AOS1 Creating a devised performance AOS2 Presenting a devised performance	Outcome 1/2 – Devise, document and perform a performance based on experiences or stories
Unit 2 – Using Australia as Inspiration	AOS1 Using Australia as Inspiration	Outcome 1/2 – Devise, document and perform a solo or ensemble non-naturalistic performance

### NEW SOUTH WALES – Higher School Certificate – Drama

<b>Drama Stage 6 - Preliminary</b>	Improvisation, Playbuilding and Acting Elements of Production in Performance Theatrical traditions and Performance styles
<b>PDHPE</b>	Self and relationships, individual and community health, problem solving, decision-making

### QUEENSLAND – QCAA Drama

<b>Forming</b>	When forming, students create, shape and manage drama through the application, manipulate and structuring of the dramatic language.
<b>Presenting</b>	When presenting students manipulate the dramatic languages to realise dramatic action and communicate dramatic meaning to an audience. Work in the Presenting dimension requires students to demonstrate their understanding of the purpose and elements of drama in a variety of contexts, forms and styles.
<b>Responding</b>	When responding students demonstrate their skills in interpretation, analysis and evaluation of dramatic action and meaning to communicate a position. They also examine how the dramatic languages are employed in professional, independent or non-school based productions and performances.

### SOUTH AUSTRALIA – SACE Drama

<b>Building self confidence</b>	Through learning to trust their intuition, using creative impulses, taking risks, having confidence in their decisions and achieving success through participation and expression. Building skills and strategies to increase resolve and resilience and to accomplish personal goals. Expressing their personal voice by exploring dramatic works and experiences and communicating those responses, observations and opinions.
<b>Dramatic Theory and Practice</b>	Students explore the ways in which theories and practices have shaped, and continue to shape drama. Through written, oral and practical tasks, students deepen and personalise their understanding of the topics covered.

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA – SCSA Drama

<b>Drama Ideas</b>	Students create, interpret, explore, develop and present drama ideas including articulating their own ideas, exploring and experimenting and presenting drama ideas for specific purposes, audiences and spaces.
<b>Drama skills and processes</b>	Students apply drama skills, techniques, processes, conventions and technologies, apply specific skills, apply knowledge and conventions of drama and use technologies and undertake relevant production roles.
<b>Drama in Society</b>	Students understand the role of drama in society, understand the interrelationships between drama and its historical and cultural contexts, understand its social and cultural value, and purpose.

## TASMANIA – TCE – DRAMA 3 AND THEATRE PERFORMANCE 3

<b>Drama 3</b>	Creating characters from scripts. Presenting solo and ensemble performances, live theatre, theatrical genres.
<b>Theatre Performance 3</b>	Acting skills, ensemble and solo performance, improvisation, vocal techniques, performing to an audience, the history of theatre (comedy).

Resources created by Meg Upton, *Arts-in-Sync*, June, 2015.

Adapted and developed from original resources *Are You Trying To Be Funny?* created by Ian McFadyen

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