

# bio.

## CLASSROOM



### Harry Houdini Classroom Guide

**Introduction:** Born Erik Weisz (also spelled Erich Weiss) to a Jewish-Hungarian immigrant family, Harry Houdini had a flair for the dramatic from a young age. Houdini's career began with dime musuems, sideshows and circuses, where he worked as an amateur pair with his older brother. After he married a young Catholic girl and fellow performer, Houdini was about to give up magic for more a more reliable job when he got his first big break. Within months, fans throughout America and Europe were dazzled by his extreme escapism — Houdini could free himself from suspended straightjackets, water-filled milk cans, and confined spaces in performances that emphasized his daring and theatrics.

In a few short years, Houdini's fame had spread across the globe. He harnessed the latest technological innovations such as motion pictures and aviation to increase his popularity and prestige — helping him become one of the most recognizable figures around the world. In his last great feat of trickery, Harry Houdini died on the day of mischief and mystery - Halloween 1926. Yet his legend lives on. Still considered the greatest and most well known magician of all time, Houdini's legacy for magic, performance and dramatics endures.

#### **Curriculum Links:**

*Houdini: The Great Escape* would be an excellent addition to history, social studies, American culture, drama and performance, and science and technology courses, as well as after-school events and activities. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students.

**Vocabulary:**

Using a dictionary ([www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com)) or an encyclopedia, students may want to define or explain the significance of the following terms from this program:

- Charisma
- Consternation
- Fraud
- Gimmick
- Illusive
- Languish
- Miraculous
- Publicity
- Submerge
- Supernatural
- Truant
- Vigil

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you think Houdini's relationship with his mother shaped his life?
2. Why was the autobiography of Robert-Houdan so influential to Houdini as a young man? Is there a famous figure that similarly inspires you?
3. Where did the name "Harry Houdini" come from? What other important people have changed their names for the purpose of show business?
4. How did the unique acts in the circus inspire Houdini in his magic?
5. How did Houdini's meeting with businessman Martin Beck dramatically change the course of his career?
6. How did Houdini relate and appeal to the masses of struggling immigrants coming to America? Can you think of a performer, politician or athlete today that inspires whole groups of Americans?
7. What were Houdini's biggest crowd-pleasing tricks? What were his secrets for their success?
8. What did Houdini's reverence to magicians of the past reveal about his devotion to the art of magic?
9. Why did Houdini become so obsessed with spiritualism? How did he seek to expose spiritualists across the nation?
10. What did Houdini represent to his fans? Do you think his life is an example of the American dream? Discuss.
11. How does the myth of Houdini continue to grow?

**Extended Activities:**

1. Ask students to create a magic show poster for their own vaudeville performance. They can design the posters to appeal to a wide audience, using colorful illustrations to encourage people to attend. They can decide how much the ticket would cost, how they would advertise most effectively, and what the performance would entail. Finally, they can display their posters in the hallways or on classroom boards to create a museum of authentic vaudeville advertisements.
2. Magicians have played important roles in communities throughout history. Ask students to research the history of magic and find another magician they think is interesting or important. Then, have students write 2-3 page essays about this magician, some of their key tricks or approaches to magic, and their importance within their social context. Students can share these projects with the larger class or group in short oral or visual presentations.
3. After watching this Bio, ask students to reflect on what they learned and then pursue additional research online or at the library about magic tricks. Then, ask them to create or learn to perform a trick of their own. When practicing these tricks, ask students to consider Houdini's emphasis on performance and theatrics

- to sell their illusion. Finally, ask them to perform a magic show for their classmates and compete against each other for the most effective, creative, and surprising tricks!
4. Ask students to imagine they are a budding journalist reporting in the time of Houdini! Have them write an article describing one of his most famous feats (i.e. escapes from handcuffs, straightjackets, milk cans, etc). They should be sure to include a compelling headline, illustrations and vivid imagery to make the article appealing to readers. When finished, the class can combine these articles to create a newspaper commemorating Houdini's greatest works of magic.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **Websites**

Houdini biography, photo gallery and more:

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Harry-Houdini-40056>

Radio broadcasts on Houdini's legacy:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1485266>

Houdini's life story:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vshchnr.html>

#### **Books**

Houdini, Harry. *Houdini on Magic* (Dover Publications, 1953)

Levi, Eliphas. *The History of Magic* (Red Wheel, 1999)

Kalush, William and Larry Sloman. *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero* (Atria, 2007)