

## How do we do this?

First, a quick repeat of the project design.

The Middle Ages is the name of a comedy series. It features a group of established characters who get into situations that are real, funny, and sometimes a little serious, but all relatable to middle school students.

Using the pilot episode and sample episode as a guide, an after school provider, ideally with the help of volunteer college students, will guide middle schoolers through the process of writing their own short episodes for The Middle Ages. Many times they will want to then act out the episodes, and sometimes they will be able to videotape the episodes for the enjoyment of a much wider audience. **All of this can be done on a next-to-nothing budget.**

*This project works no matter how many times a week a group meets. The more often they meet, the more episodes they can turn out.*

The NEXT step is to download, print, and read the [PILOT script](#) and the [SAMPLE episode](#). The pilot script is longer because it was used to establish the [characters](#) and the premise. **The sample episode is only about ten pages long and is a good representative of what an episode should be like.**

The next step is to gather middle school students who might be interested in the project. I found that students who had an interest in writing, acting, comedy, and production were plentiful, not to mention those interested in wardrobe and make-up.

The same interests will help you in getting volunteer college students (mentors) to participate. In addition, college students interested in education, social work, and just volunteerism should yield the people you need. Sometimes the mentors can get credit from their schools. **(Mentors can sometimes be high school students)** I'd recommend one mentor for every three to four middle schoolers. Just contact the various department heads at a university, college, or community college near you. **Colleges frequently have community outreach programs you can access.**

## GET TO KNOW THE SHOW

The first step is to make sure everyone understands who the characters are in the show. The characters and a little bit about them are listed on the menu bar and at the beginning of the scripts.

The next step is to have the entire group, middle schoolers and mentors, sit around a big table, or in a circle. You should have an **OUT LOUD** reading of both the pilot script and the example episode. Assign one student to "play" each character for the reading, saying the DIALOGUE, while one of the mentors reads the STAGE DIRECTIONS. Stage directions are the descriptions of the set and the actions that the characters do.

It's a good idea to do the out loud readings a couple of times. The more times, the more comfortable they'll become with the way the characters talk and the kind of comedy The Middle Ages is. It's also a good idea to let different students read different parts.

Sometimes, groups will actually want to make the acting out of either the pilot or the sample episode the next step in their process, before writing their own episode. This is totally fine, and in fact, a good idea.

## **COMING UP WITH EPISODE STORY IDEAS**

First step, a mentor, (usually with a laptop), **must** take notes of the group discussion. These notes are then printed up and are on hand for the next get together.

Keeping in mind who the characters are, and keeping in mind that the show is limited in terms of the rooms (SETS) that the characters live or go to school in, the middle schoolers should now be encouraged to come up with STORY IDEAS for the show. They should think about the family in the show and what kinds of predicaments they might find themselves in. (e.g. The oldest son BYRON, starts speaking Spanish while sleepwalking...or...The daughter, LANI, becomes a judge at the talent show so she can choose her untalented crush as the winner).

One of the BEST ways to elicit ideas is to encourage the students to think about amusing things, or embarrassing things, or even serious things, that have happened in their own lives or in the lives of their friends; things that have happened at home, or at school. These story lines can then be transposed to the characters in The Middle Ages, and an episode story is born.

### **IMPORTANT**

Some students are hesitant to offer up ideas, for fear that they're dumb, or embarrassing, or they're just afraid to speak up. They should know that in a real Hollywood writers' room, writers throw out ideas like wild, whether they're sure how good they are or not. This is because sometimes they're better than they think, and sometimes, one person's idea will trigger a whole conversation that ends in a great idea.

Another solution to this is if the students "pitch" ideas in small groups to their mentor, who then presents the small group's ideas to the overall writing staff. This degree of anonymity can help students feel comfortable.

Once a list of possible story ideas is collected, I let the students vote on which episode they think will be the coolest to do. They should bear in mind, they'll probably do many episodes down the line, so they'll get to do their favorites.

## **FROM STORY IDEA TO BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END**

The next step after coming up with a story idea, is to make sure it has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Say we go with the talent show idea.

In the beginning, we'd show that Lani thinks talent shows are stupid. We'd also show the boy she has a crush on has a terrible voice.

In the middle, we'd see that the boyfriend is going to enter the talent contest. We'd also see a complete reversal by Lani. She's now going to become a judge for the contest so she can make sure her crush wins and then he'll adore her.

In the end, we have the contest itself. There's lots of talented kids, but the crush is screechy horrible. Despite that, Lani makes it so he wins.

But, instead of the crush feeling grateful to her, he now gets a swelled head and thinks he can have any girl he wants.

**It's important to remember that even though this episode features one family member, every other member of the family would be involved with opinions and anecdotes.**

## **A FEW IMPORTANT FACTS**

A script is made up of two ACTS. If the script is ten pages, Act 1 would end around the end of page 5. (there's wiggle room on both the length of the script and where the First Act ends) Each act is made up of SCENES. A scene is a conversation, or action, that takes place in a particular room at a particular time. (e.g. A morning conversation in the kitchen between Lani and her mother about how cute Lani's crush is, is a scene. If one of the sons enters the kitchen during the conversation and makes a crack about the crush, this is not a new scene. It's just a BEAT, or moment, in the same scene.

But, if in the living room, Dad and the other son are battling over the remote, that is a different scene.

**So, it's a new scene if the location or the time of day change.**

Remember, there is no set number of scenes in an act. A whole act can be in one scene, or an act can be made up of several scenes.

## **FROM BEG/MID/END TO THE OUTLINE**

We know the story idea. We know the beginning/middle/end. Next, is to make an OUTLINE of the story. In show business, we do what is called a STEP OUTLINE. All this really is is a LIST of the SCENES that make up our story, in the order they occur.

For example.

Act 1.

Scene 1. Interior Kitchen – Morning

Lani and her mother, TONI, discuss Lani's new crush and how she's flipped for him, even though she's not sure he knows who she is. Mom tells her to not go ga-ga, and explains a funny anecdote from her girlhood. Lani ignores her.

Byron, the older brother, enters and talks about the talent show at school, and how he'll win just because of his good looks. Lani says talent shows are dumb.

Scene 2. Interior Living Room – Moments later

DEAN, the younger brother and the father, NAT, are arguing over who gets to watch what on TV. Dad wants to watch football, Dean, kind of a nerd, wants to watch the Discovery Channel. Funny conversation as Dad tries to explain the academic value of watching the game.

Scene 3. Interior School Hallway – Later

Byron and Lani's crush, Toyman, are singing a duet before class. Toyman's voice is horrible. Byron tells him he sounds like a muffler with the flu. Toyman says wait until he wins the talent contest. A swooning Lani overhears.

AND SO ON...

**REMEMBER, EACH SCENE IS SUPPOSED TO HELP TELL THE STORY, MOVING IT THROUGH THE BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END.**

## **NEXT- WRITING THE SCENES**

**IMPORTANT : REFER TO THE PILOT AND SAMPLE EPISODE AS A GUIDE TO HOW A SCRIPT SHOULD LOOK AND "FEEL"**

There is no best technique for writing the scenes. Sometimes, they can be written by the whole group, with students suggesting ideas and lines of dialogue. (all captured by a laptop). Sometimes, groups of three or four students will each take a stab at the scene, and then the whole group will pick the parts of each they like most. Sometimes, each member of the whole group will try and write the scene by him/herself. In every case, mentors are encouraged to help out.

**If necessary in writing the first few episodes, it is totally okay that the mentor(s) play a large role in transposing the ideas of the staff into an actual script. This way, the students will still get the satisfaction of coming up with the story, moments, funny conversation, and so on, without being temporarily stymied by a new format of writing.**

- Scenes should be written in the order they occur in the outline.
- The dialogue in scenes should sound like real conversation.
- The dialogue should reflect the personality of the character who's speaking.
- Comedy **DOES NOT** come from jokes (e.g. a man and a monkey walk into a bar).
- Comedy comes from the situations the family finds itself in and their attitudes towards each other, **THE WAY THEY TALK TO EACH OTHER.**

**IMPORTANT:** A rule of thumb in Hollywood is, "writing is re-writing." This means that there will be several drafts of a script, and each one will get better and better as it is **read out loud** and edited. New suggestions will make it better as will taking out things that seemed like a good idea at the time, but don't ultimately work.

### **HOW TO PERFORM THE SCRIPT**

#### **IMPORTANT**

It's important to note that there is no "one size fits all" answer to how to perform the episodes that your group writes. Obviously this is a function of the size of your group, the size of your space, and what kind of budget you may have. The show can be performed for the afterschool group, or for large groups (school assemblies). If done for a large audience, it might be a good idea to present two or more episodes.

The Form: The Middle Ages is performed just like a regular school play. The simpler the better.

Director: The director should be the after school provider or a mentor. The director tells the actors where to stand and sometimes helps the actors know how to deliver their lines.

Actors: In our case, our writers switched over to actors and performed the script themselves. In some cases, there might be a totally different group in the after school program who wish to act what your writers write. Also, sometimes one person will play more than one role (accomplished through wardrobe, hats, glasses, hairstyle, etc.).

Sets: Again, this varies depending on the program. **In our case, we staged our whole production in one room for a cost of about eight dollars total.** Through quick changes of some simple furniture, we were able to make believe the family was in a dining room (four chairs, a table), a living room (a chair, couch, and a lamp), or a school hallway (painted some large cardboard to look like lockers).

Wardrobe: The students brought their own clothes or borrowed from friends.

## **HOW TO FILM THE PRODUCTION**

**IMPORTANT** : It is very important to remember that this project **DOES NOT** have to be filmed in order to be successful.

That being said, it can be done very inexpensively and will allow a much larger audience for your students' work. Many times schools or parents have handycams that you can use. In our case, some of our college students borrowed cameras from our local community tv station. We then made a DVD of our performance and were able to show it not only on a large screen for hundreds of afterschool students and their parents, BUT ALSO GOT IT AIRED ONCE A WEEK ON THAT SAME LOCAL TV STATION, LIKE A REAL SERIES. Good Luck, and any questions, contact [matineescholars@gmail.com](mailto:matineescholars@gmail.com)

**By the way, we'd love to know about your experience with this project, so please let us know who you are, where you are, how many middle schoolers participated, etc. Also, we'd love to actually see your work, so please send any scripts or videos that you create. [matineescholars@gmail.com](mailto:matineescholars@gmail.com).**

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