



BIG DRAMAS second edition

Sticks and Stones

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Level	Suitable for Year 9
Difficulty	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
Genre	Greek chorus-inspired modern drama
Themes	Gossip, covert communication, ethical consequences of speech, bullying
Literary and dramatic techniques	Refrain, epithets, soliloquy, rhetorical questions, chorus and soloist
Cast	28 characters, though some doubling is possible

Why choose this play?

Bullying in schools has never been taken more seriously than today. The effect of verbal bullying can be disastrous and a number of subject areas work with students to warn them about the effects of gossip and to help develop ways to deal with it. Much of this, however, deals with the emotional aspect of gossip, rather than the linguistic or interpersonal aspects. What, for example, are the linguistic features of gossip? How can a student learn more about the mechanics of gossip and take control of the words they hear, produce, or are party to? *Sticks and Stones* shows the effect of gossip on a number of different students; these teacher notes offer a rigorous and realistic toolkit for identifying the language features of gossip and analysing its uses and abuses. Both these notes and the play aim to help students 'know their enemy'.

Practical considerations

This is a serious play about a serious subject, and students who have experienced bullying, particularly verbal bullying, may find it distressing—monologues from the bullies' victims are particularly plaintive.

Plan for 50 minutes to read through the text and around 100 minutes to set up and act it out. This lesson takes around 100 minutes to teach, including a class read-through of the play.



Teaching *Sticks and Stones* by Sue Murray

Learning objectives

Students will:

- understand that conversations have different language modes shaped by their place, purpose and participants
- analyse a recent conversation and discover how it can be categorised according to the features of functional linguistics—field, mode and tenor
- recognise that gossip is a mode of conversation and see how the gossip reported in the play text has certain linguistic features
- think about how gossip is part of human communication because it has some useful features
- assume the voice of one of the bullies to investigate their perspective and consider how they might justify themselves
- prepare a TED-talk (see Learning activity 2) informing the audience about one feature of gossip.



Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

Year 9 content descriptions	Language: Language for interaction	ACELA1551	Understand that roles and relationships are developed and challenged through language and interpersonal skills.
	Language: Language for interaction	ACELA1552	Investigate how evaluation can be expressed directly and indirectly using devices, for example allusion, evocative vocabulary and metaphor.
	Literacy: Interacting with others	ACELY1811	Use interaction skills to present and discuss an idea and to influence and engage an audience by selecting persuasive language, varying voice tone, pitch, and pace, and using elements such as music and sound effects.
General capabilities	Personal and social capability		Students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. The capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships.
	Ethical understanding		Students develop ethical understanding as they identify and investigate the nature of ethical concepts, values and character traits, and understand how reasoning can assist ethical judgment. Ethical understanding involves students in building a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook that helps them to manage context, conflict and uncertainty, and to develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others.





1. Approaching the text

Read through the text carefully—the groups/soloist exchange could be done by the class/teacher to avoid confusion and stop-starting.

2. Introducing ideas

i) Conversations aren't all the same—we can talk about different 'modes' of conversation.

Ordinary, colloquial speech has different registers and intentions and uses language in different ways.

Understanding activity

In small groups, ask students to recall a recent conversation and consider the characteristics of language used in it and the social settings which inform this.

Students could sequence their analyses by thinking in terms of field, mode and tenor. Although these are quite sophisticated linguistic concepts, they can be simplified by questions appropriate to a Year 9 analysis. For example:

Interaction type: Conversation	Features	Function	Example
Field			
What would you call this type of conversation?	A telling-off		
What's the conversation's specific purpose?	For my mum to vent about the state of my messy room and get me to agree to clean it once a week.	Meets the immediate needs of one person and establishes the needs of both.	<i>I am so sick of running after you! You are going to promise me that this will stop, IMMEDIATELY!</i>
What's being discussed?	How I take her for granted and live in a tip.	Emphasises the basis of the mother-child relationship.	<i>You take it for granted that I'll let one room of this house turn into the municipal dump!</i>
Mode			
What kind of speech is this? E.g. narrative, persuasive, didactic?	Partly persuasive and partly didactic.	She wants to persuade the child to agree that their actions were wrong and will be fixed, but also to show that this type of behaviour is unhelpful in society generally.	<i>Can you see that this is just NOT ON? You wouldn't be doing this in the street or at school, would you?</i>

continued ...



What devices are part of this kind of speech?	Rhetorical questions	Engages the listener but signals that they should not interrupt	<i>Why can't you just pull your weight?</i>
	Similes	Drives home the point in vivid visual terms.	<i>It's like swimming through garbage!</i>
	Invective	Shows the speaker's emotional state and points to their unmet needs.	<i>You're such a disappointment—only the World Health Organization would want to live with you!</i>
	Imperatives, directions	Establishes wishes and directs the next part of the interaction.	<i>Get out of my sight and take the vacuum with you NOW!</i>
	Hyperbole	Emphasises speaker's mood and perceived size of the listener's infraction.	<i>You're the most revolting creature I've ever seen!</i>
	Specificity	Shows listener that the speaker has expert knowledge; ensures that the situation will be rectified correctly.	<i>And make sure you get the small dusty blue sock lurking under your desk.</i>
Tenor			
What roles are assumed by the participants?	Listener/speaker or audience/speaker.	There must be two participants to form a conversation; a speaker's goal of persuasion can't be achieved without a listener	<i>Get in here immediately, I want to talk to you!</i>
What are the social or power relations? Are they permanent or temporary?	Parent/child in a hostile setting (temporary, hopefully) but different to parent/child in a positive or social setting.	Basis of our culture is the greater power of parent over child—and that this power is not continually signalled.	<i>Don't answer back! (Compared to: I wish you'd talk to me sometimes ...)</i>
How are these roles signalled?	Deferring to the speaker.	Calms speaker down.	<i>Don't interrupt me!</i>
	Showing that the listener understands and is receptive to the speaker (this is called back-channel behaviour).	Establishes that the listener is compliant and co-operative in the purpose of the interaction.	<i>Uh-huh. Yes, mum. I know.</i>

ii) Gossip is a mode of conversation

Gossip is somewhere between casual and intimate in conversational style. It's usually verbal, but sometimes written (occasionally advertisements try to use the same register and devices to establish a relationship with the viewer/reader so that they can persuade them to buy their product). The newsletter mentioned in the play is couched in the same intimate style.

Casual conversational style is characterised by the following:

- it takes place between in-group friends and acquaintances, usually of the same social 'level' (i.e. it tends not to happen between superiors and subordinates)





- no background information is provided
- ellipsis, slang and interruptions are common.
Intimate conversational style is characterised by the following:
- it is non-public
- it usually happens between family members and close friends
- tone is more important than words or grammar
- private vocabulary may be used
- non-verbal messages are just as important as verbal ones.

Go through the first scene of *Sticks and Stones* and list the aspects of gossip mentioned in the exchange between the groups. You should find:

- the privileged position of the gossip-spreader ('Queen bee')
- swift and inaccurate exchange of information about third parties ('he said she said he said')
- implication of covert and thus shameful activities ('Right under our nose')
- malicious intent ('Take a fact, add some thought/From a nasty mind')
- alterations, adaptations, outright fiction ('twist it, turn it and change it').

Understanding activity

Ask pairs or threes of students to take one scene from the play and to analyse the language features of the gossip. They should consider not only what is said, but what it achieves. For example, scene 2:

Line	Device	Purpose
Emily: 'Miss Thunder-thighs ... says she's been dieting.'	Periphrasis (the substitution of a descriptive phrase for a proper name), alliteration	Memorable phrase
'Did you see her in her bikini last weekend?'	Question	Question seeks to establish that speaker and listener have the same experiences and share the same opinions about them
Louisa: 'Like squeezing a watermelon into a banana skin ...'	Simile	Paints a vivid and comical picture, likening a human to edible objects—over-eating is Sarah's vice

Overall, the language devices in this scene are used to show the power of a group against an increasingly isolated individual and to paint a distorted and demeaning picture of her.

Pairs or threes should briefly present their analyses to the rest of the class.

iii) Although we often rate gossip as a bad thing, it has some useful functions.

Students should have some understanding of how gossip functions as a distinct conversational register, largely dictated by its role as a strategy for demonstrating or manipulating power relations in groups. Discuss with the class how, no matter how hard we try, gossip seems to be something that humans can't help doing—this is because it can have a useful purpose.

Understanding activity

Ask students to complete a PMI (Plus, Minus, Interesting) chart showing uses, downsides and interesting aspects of gossip. To help them, you could let them read the [Wikipedia entry](#) for gossip.





3. The learning activity

There are two parts to this learning activity:

1. Ask students to work in pairs. One student should be the school counsellor and one should be either Emily, Kate or Louisa (the bullies). They should imagine that reactions to the newsletter have prompted an investigation by the school. Each of the three girls has been summoned for a discussion with the counsellor to assess their role in events and to ask them to justify themselves.

In their pair, students should formulate some questions that the counsellor would ask the bully and what the girl might answer. They should answer honestly, considering the personality of the character and the psychology of a typical bully (i.e. they've usually been bullied themselves at some point and are unhappy or frightened about what they think is a loss of power connected to looks, money or popularity). Consider particularly:

- When did you first think badly of your victims?
 - How did you see them? Describe your feelings
 - Have you ever been bullied yourself?
 - How did it feel?
 - How does it make you feel when you see the effect on one of your victims?
 - At home, who has all the power in your house? How do you know that?
 - What are you most afraid of at school?
 - What do you think will happen now?
 - How will you manage it?
2. Students should work in pairs to create a TED talk about gossip. They should choose one aspect of gossip from the list below and present it in TED format. [This video](#) on the TED website might give them some ideas (though it's a bit clichéd and, at 18 minutes, quite long). They should create a presentation to accompany their talk and make a transcript of it available.
 - Content—what's gossip usually about?
 - Form—how to tell gossip from chit-chat
 - Etymology—'gossip': what a strange word; where does it come from and what do other languages call gossip?
 - Function—what is the function of gossip in real life? In literature? In movies?
 - Mode—is verbal gossip different from texted gossip? What about visual gossip, like Instagram, or Facebook posts?
 - Exceptional examples—not just school gossip, but historically exceptional gossips. What made them such stand-out examples?
 - Consequences—what happens with old gossip and to gossips, or those gossiped about?
 - A beginner's guide—the top five tips for beginning a good gossip
 - A quitter's guide—how do you stop gossiping? Is it as hard as giving up chocolate—or harder?

4. Rounding up

Discuss with the students how this lesson has handled the topic of gossip differently to methods they may have encountered previously.

In most formal settings, students will be told that gossip is bad and harmful and that they shouldn't participate in it. But like other human activities, it has a useful purpose and has evolved as part of our social make-up. This play shows how the useful purpose can be diverted and a bonding activity which communicates group attitudes, cultural mores and informal knowledge can become vicious, degrading and dangerous. Affirm with the class that, by giving students the tools to analyse their informal conversations more astutely, they have greater control over what they participate in and this contributes to more confident, intelligent and hopefully generous members of a community.





Assessment ideas

- i) Give students a transcript of a conversation between two people and ask them to perform the functional analysis of field, tenor and mode which was described in the first Understanding Activity above. You could set it out as either a free-format essay (which would be very challenging indeed) or scaffold it with the questions used. Once they've performed a thorough analysis of the text, ask students what they think the use of this type of conversation might be.
- ii) Sue Murray's *Mango Time*, also in *Big Dramas* (second edition), addresses bullying which is partly verbal. Give students an extract from this play and ask them to identify some of the language devices used in verbal bullying and what the purpose of each device is in the context.
- iii) Many websites are now solely devoted to gossip. Ask students to select a gossip site (such as [The Hollywood Gossip](#) or [Perez Hilton](#)) and identify the features which facilitate gossip on the site (e.g. hyperlinks allow users to skip from one item to another about the same celebrity; glossy images capture attention, GIFs attract the eye but allow you to continue scrolling because they last a second or two, and provocative headings (falsely) suggest one type of news, before delivering another). After identifying the features, they should also say what the effect of the feature is on the user. For example, the endless scrolling allows the user to be exposed to more advertisements and the social media icons facilitate the item being spread through a variety of other sites, thus further marketing the site. The assessment could be configured as a number of short questions, followed by a longer response asking the student to consider how online gossip is ultimately about power—economic, cultural and political power.

Using the play with other resources

It is possible to combine this play with other Macmillan resources if you have them in your collection. The exercises in the following workbooks provide useful warm-up activities with which to differentiate the concepts in this lesson. Students could attempt one or two of the exercises at home as a preparatory exercise for this lesson.

	Complete English Basics 3 (2nd edn)	Unit 8: Interesting people Unit 20: Speaking out
	National English Skills 9	Unit 10: Up close and personal Unit 16: Drama
	English Workbook 3 (3rd edn)	Unit 1: Being a teenager

Further reading

- This [chapter](#) from online book *The TalkWorks Guide* covers the idea of conversational modes.
- This [Wikipedia page](#) explains Michael Halliday's theory of Field-Tenor-Mode, which many teachers will have covered this in their own professional training.



- On the subject of gossip: An [etymology](#) of the word gossip; an entertaining [review of a book](#) about the very long history of celebrity gossip; and a [discussion](#) of the idea that history itself is gossip.

Linked texts

Sticks and Stones could support and relate to the following NSW Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 5 (among many others):

- *VRough with the Smooth: Stories of Australian Men*, edited by BR Coffey
- *The Divine Wind*, Garry Disher
- *48 Shades of Brown*, Nick Earls
- *Making the Most of It*, Lisa Forrest
- *The Dons*, Archimede Fusillo
- *Looking for Alibrandi*, Melina Marchetta
- *Touch Me*, James Moloney
- *The Fifth Quest*, Debra Oswald
- *Poison under Their Lips*, Mark Svendsen
- *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, Markus Zusak
- *Careful He Might Hear You* (PG), directed by Carl Schultz
- *Dead Poets Society* (PG), directed by Peter Weir
- *Edward Scissorhands* (PG), directed by Tim Burton
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* (PG), directed by Oliver Parker
- *A League of Their Own* (PG), directed by Penny Marshall
- *Much Ado about Nothing* (PG), directed by Ken Branagh
- *Pleasantville* (M), directed by Gary Ross
- *10 Things I Hate about You* (PG), directed by Gil Junger
- *48 Shades of Brown*, a play adapted by Philip Dean from the novel by Nick Earls
- *All Stops Out*, Michael Gow
- *What is the Matter with Mary Jane?*, Wendy Harmer and Sancia Robinson
- *Dags*, Debra Oswald



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