Clowning Around

Clowns are a part of most cultures. Their history goes back to ancient times, and the modern-day clown emerged in the 19th century. In this learning reminiscence activity, we'll learn about the history of clowns, recall some famous clowns, have fun with a trivia quiz, and reminisce about clowns we have experienced through discussion questions.

Preparations and How-to’s

- This is a copy of the complete activity for the facilitator to present. Use the Discussion Starters to help get a conversation going.
- Print a copy of the pictures or display them on the television.
- Print copies of the Clowning Around Trivia Quiz and distribute for players to answer and then see how well they did when the facilitator gives the answer.

Introduction

Some people love clowns and are greatly amused by their appearance and silly antics. Others profess to have a fear of them and find their painted faces more scary than funny. Whatever your impression of clowns, they were most likely a part of your childhood and also present in the lives of your own children. If you have been to a circus, then you have been entertained by clowns. Let's learn more about them.

A History of Clowns

Throughout history, there have been people whose talent is to make others laugh. Egypt, China, and Rome all had outlandishly dressed individuals whose purpose was to entertain.

In ancient Rome there was a famous clown called Stupidus, whose name meant “stunned” or “numb” and from which comes our current word stupid. In that time, there was also a class of clowns called Moriones, which is the origin of the word moron. And in 16th-century France, there was a clown called Zanni, which meant “rustic fool,” and from his name comes our current word zany.

Court jesters were ever-present in courts across Europe, not only entertaining rulers, but also pricking their royal egos and consciences in ways that would have gotten others summarily executed. Familiarities that were forbidden to others were permitted from jesters. William Sommers was the jester in the court of Henry VIII, and he was said to be the only one who could lift the king’s spirits when he suffered a physical ailment. There is still a plaque commemorating him in St. Leonard’s church in England.
The English word *clown* didn’t come into use until 1560, and it meant “rustic,” “boor,” and “peasant.” We can see its application in many of Shakespeare’s plays, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Think of the comic relief of Bottom and his friends, the lovable but dimwitted peasants, and we see clowns in action.

Another famous style of clown was the Harlequin, developed in England in the 17th century and characterized by a checkered costume. These clowns played lighthearted, witty, and nimble servants, often acting to thwart their masters’ plans in pursuit of their own. They often carried “magic” sticks, which they waved or slapped to signal a scenery change, hence the word *slapstick*.

In the early 1800s, the modern version of the clown was developed. As circuses arose, clowns were a natural fit. In the 20th century, we saw hobo clowns, children’s clowns, and even scary clowns.

**Discussion Starters**

- Do you remember when you saw your first clown? Was it at a circus, parade, or other event?
- How would you describe the clowns you have seen? Did you find their appearance amusing or scary?
- Did you enjoy going to the circus? Other than the clowns, what are some of the other circus acts you most remember?

**Famous Clowns**

Joseph Grimaldi created the character Joey in the early 1800s. He is reportedly the first clown to wear whiteface makeup and paint on red lips. He wore flamboyant, colorful clothing and specialized in physical tricks. He is considered the father of modern clowning, and clowns are called Joeys in his honor. A memorial is held every year at Trinity Church in the London borough of Hackney, and hundreds of clown performers attend the service in full clown regalia.

Oleg Popov was a famous Russian clown in the 1950s. His big break came when he replaced a hurt teammate in the Moscow Circus. He eventually became head clown and was one of the most beloved clowns in the Soviet Union. He was known as the Sunshine Clown for his positive and optimistic presentation.

Emmett Kelly was an American circus performer whose sad persona Weary Willy was modeled on Depression-era hobos. His best-known routine was one where he tried to sweep up a spotlight. He didn’t wear whiteface, but used a flesh-tone base. Like Popov, his type of clown is called redface or Auguste.

Red Skelton was an American comedy entertainer on both radio and TV. He even had his own television series, *The Red Skelton Show*, during which he sometimes dressed as a clown named Freddie. He then began a separate career as a painter, using clowns as his subjects. It is said that he made more money as an artist than as an entertainer! He said he wanted to be known as a clown, because he felt a clown could do everything.
Bob Keeshan, television producer and actor, was best known as the title character on *Captain Kangaroo*, a children’s show that ran for 30 years. He started his career as the original Clarabell the Clown on *The Howdy Doody Show*. Clarabell communicated with a horn and was known for playing practical jokes.

Willard Scott is best known as a weather presenter. He is also an author, actor, comedian, and radio personality. What many people don’t know is that he created the Ronald McDonald character and was the original Ronald McDonald!

He also played one of the most famous clowns of all, Bozo the Clown, a fictional character whose television show was franchised across the world, with television stations putting on their own local shows.

**Discussion Starters**

- How many of the actors mentioned above do you remember? Which names are new to you?
- Have you ever dressed up and painted your face like a clown? Describe your experience.
- Have you or your children ever been singled out in the audience by a clown and taken on stage to join in their act? If so, what was that like?

**The Clown Hierarchy**

Did you know there is a hierarchy of clowns? There are three basic types.

The whiteface clown has the highest status as it is the oldest of the clown archetypes. Whiteface clowns, in the tradition of Grimaldi, start with a white foundation that covers their entire face and neck. Features are then painted on in either red or black. They are usually more extravagantly dressed than the other clown types, with a ruffled collar and pointed hat. If they perform with other types of clowns, they play the role of the straight man. In addition to Grimaldi, Willard Scott played whiteface clowns in his Bozo and Ronald McDonald personas.

The Auguste or red clown is next in status. This style of clown uses a pink or flesh-tone base. The eyes and mouth are circled in white, and features are highlighted, usually in red or black. They usually wear baggy clothes in plaids and/or polka dots, wild wigs, and large noses and shoes. They are usually not instigators but recipients of comic mischief. They are the ones who get the pies in the face, who sit in wet paint or slip on a banana peel. Popov and Keeshan are examples of the Auguste clown.

The character clown is the lowest in clown status, and they typically play an eccentric character, such as a hobo. Their makeup is an exaggeration of the human face, such as big ears or strange hair styles, and props such as glasses, mustaches, beards, freckles, or warts. When acting with other styles of clown, they are often less dim and more cunning than the Auguste clown. Emmett Kelly and Red Skelton played character clowns.

You can see the clown stereotypes in actors who do not dress in clown face or clothing. The duo Abbott and Costello are good examples of a whiteface and Auguste clown duo, with Abbott playing the straight man role of the whiteface and Costello playing the Auguste clown. Laurel and Hardy are another example.
Discussion Starters

• Did it surprise you to learn there are different types of clowns?
• What type of clown are you most familiar with?

Summary

From ancient to modern times, societies have valued performers who can make people laugh. These talented individuals—today’s clowns—have not only lightened spirits but they have also pricked consciences and heightened social awareness. Love them or hate them, it can be said that clowns have helped shape civilization.

Clown Trivia Quiz

Test your knowledge and learn even more about clowns with this interesting quiz.

1. In clowning, there is a hierarchy, with the whiteface clown at the high end and the _________ at the low end.
   A. character clown
   B. class clown
   C. girl clown
   D. Auguste clown

   **Answer:** A) character clown. Because of this understood hierarchy, an Auguste clown can never play a trick on a whiteface clown, but a whiteface clown can play a trick on anybody.

2. Would-be clowns can imitate another clown in everything except:
   A. clothes
   B. act
   C. hairdo
   D. face

   **Answer:** D) face. A clown’s face is their trademark, which cannot be copied by any other clown. The clothes and act of a clown, however, can be imitated.

3. To trademark a clown face, a clown sends a photo of their face into the Clown and Character Registry, where the face is then painted on a _______________ and kept in the registry.
   A. 12 X 16-inch canvas
   B. wall
   C. goose egg
   D. glass

   **Answer:** C) goose egg. The tradition of painting the clown face on a goose egg dates back to the 1500s when clowns would paint their face on an egg so they would remember what the face looked like.
4. In Russia, clowns are looked up to with the same prestige that ballerinas or pianists enjoy. In
order to join the Moscow State Circus, clowns must go to the Moscow State Circus College
for Circus and Variety Arts for ________________.
   A. 7 years
   B. 8 months
   C. 2 years
   D. 4 years
   Answer: A) 7 years

5. There are between ________ and _______ clowns in the world today.
   A. 750 and 1,000
   B. 50,000 and 80,000
   C. 2,000 and 7,000
   D. 12,000 and 20,000
   Answer: B) 50,000 and 80,000

6. What famous clown was originally created by Capitol Records in the 1940s as a character
   featured in a series of children’s records?
   A. Bozo
   B. Weepy Willie
   C. Koko
   D. Clarabell
   Answer: A) Bozo

7. Bozo the Clown wears size _______ shoes.
   A. 29DD
   B. 38BBBB
   C. 50C
   D. 83AAA
   Answer: D) 83AAA

8. Santa Claus is the most widely recognized face in the world. Who comes in second?
   A. Bozo
   B. Emmett Kelly
   C. Ronald McDonald
   D. Clem Kadiddlehopper
   Answer: C) Ronald McDonald. Known as “The smile known around the world,” Ronald
   McDonald is second only to Santa Claus in terms of recognition. According to the book
   Fast Food Nation (2001), 96 percent of schoolchildren in the U.S. can identify Ronald
   McDonald. Only Santa Claus was more commonly recognized.
9. The song “Send in the Clowns” has been sung by many performers, but who wrote the song?
   A. Andrew Lloyd Webber
   B. Stephen Sondheim
   C. Paul Anka
   D. Richard Rodgers
   **Answer:** B) Stephen Sondheim

10. Emmett Kelly was a famous clown with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and was loved by thousands of circus goers. What was the name of his classic clown character?
   A. Lonely Louie
   B. Sad Sam
   C. Weary Willie
   D. Forlorn Fred
   **Answer:** C) Weary Willie

11. What song claims, “Oh, and while the King was looking down, the jester stole his thorny crown...”
   A. “American Pie”
   B. “Tears of a Clown”
   C. “Send in the Clowns”
   D. “Clowns on Parade”
   **Answer:** A) “American Pie” by Don McLean, in 1972

12. “Oh yes, I’m the ______________, just laughing and gay like a clown.” The Platters took this classic to No. 5 in 1956.
   A. happiest man in the world
   B. great pretender
   C. man on the flying trapeze
   D. lucky but lonely man
   **Answer:** B) great pretender

13. What clown did the Everly Brothers sing about in the 1960s?
   A. Clarabell
   B. Cathy’s Clown
   C. Charlie Chaplin
   D. Little Susie
   **Answer:** B) Cathy’s Clown
14. Red Skelton's characters included all the following except:
   A. Clem Kadiddlehopper and Sheriff Deadeye
   B. Freddy the Freeloader and the Mean Widdle Kid
   C. Puff-a-Lump and Piddy Poo
   D. San Fernando Red and Bolivar Shagnasty

   **Answer:** C) Puff-a-Lump and Piddy Poo

15. Known as America's Favorite Clown, Red Skelton signed off his shows with the phrase:
   A. “Good night, and God bless.”
   B. “Now it's time to say good-bye.”
   C. “Thanks for sharing a laugh or two.”
   D. “See you next week.”

   **Answer:** A) “Good night, and God bless.”
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