



## ***Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini (2006)*** **Argument Assembly Activity (Differentiated)**

### Activity Directions

- 1) Assign students to a debatable issue, with the same number of students assigned each debatable issue. Students can work individually or in pairs.
- 2) Give students two Argument Assemblers, or send out the electronic version and they should create two copies of it.
- 3) Direct students to complete each of their Argument Assemblers. Each of their two Argument Assemblers is for one of the two overall positions on their debatable issue – i.e., each side of the debatable issue gets its own Assembler.
- 4) Students will use all three of the argumentative claims. There isn't one correct ordering of the argumentative claims, though students should be told to think about what would make for the best flow in a spoken or written argument for their position.
- 5) All five pieces of evidence must be used. This means that one of the three arguments for each position will have one piece of evidence; the other two will have two pieces of evidence. Evidence and reasoning is randomly arranged on this activity document.



- 6) Each piece of evidence must be followed by the reasoning that most closely matches it.
- 7) When students have been given enough time to complete their Argument Assemblers, lead a discussion of their selections of evidence and reasoning to support each argumentative claim. Have students consider which side of the debatable issue has the stronger arguments, and have them justify their evaluation of the arguments.
- 8) Consider further assigning students to one of the two positions (either by choice or randomly), and then having them create counter-arguments against the other position's arguments.
- 9) Use these Argument Assemblers as a pre-writing resource for an argument writing assignment on *Escape!*
- 10) Collect and assess the Argument Assemblers.



## Debatable Issue #1: Showman vs. Magician

### **Position**

Harry Houdini's success and fame was more a result of his skills as a showman than his skills as a magician.

### **Argumentative Claims (reasons that the position is true)**

There is disagreement among experts about his magic skills, but everyone agrees that Houdini was a great showman.

Houdini promoted himself and even stretched the truth about himself throughout his life.

Showmanship was the key factor at crucial points in Houdini's career.

### **Evidence (reference to the text that supports the claim)**

"A rumor arose in the magic world that he would routinely make his escapes in a few minutes and then read the newspaper or play solitaire for twenty minutes or so. Only then would he muss himself up and pop through the ghost house curtains and face the audience. This was showmanship. Even his professional enemies, and he had flocks of them, conceded that as a showman the world had not seen his like before" (96).

A turning point in Houdini's career was when he realized that he could gain significant attention from newspapers (the major media of the time) and the public if he issued a challenge that offered a large cash award to anyone who could bring a pair of handcuffs that he was unable to escape from at his next show (57-58).

"While a few contemporary magicians scoff at Houdini's abilities as a magician, all concede that he had genius as a showman. When the escapist dangled upside down in a straitjacket from the top of an office building, a stampede to the box office followed. That was showmanship" (197).

'[Houdini and his wife Bess] feasted on roasted potatoes. How curious, then, that he noted in his diary for October 11, 1897, that he'd lost \$60 shooting craps. Really? Couldn't he resist conning his own diary? Playing the high roller? The sum was vast for its day, representing far more than a month's salary" (51).



As a young man, Houdini fudged his height on passport documents, stating that he was several inches taller than he actually was. He also tried to look taller in photos by standing on his tip-toes (25).

**Reasoning (explanation as to *how* the evidence supports the claim)**

Even though this is presented as a “rumor” Fleischman implies that it may be true since he doesn’t refute it. And other tactics Houdini used in his act seem to support the possibility that Houdini routinely made his tricks look much harder than they were. This is what created the consensus that the passage refers to that Houdini was an even bigger showman than magician.

This detail is even more revealing than the passport and photos. Who would lie in a diary to make it seem that he is more wealthy than he is, living a “high-roller” lifestyle, as Houdini did? Houdini was constantly making himself seem bigger, more important, more talented than he really was.

These details are meaningful. Fleischman’s biography makes it clear that showmanship is not something that Houdini just added to his magic act as a topping. Showmanship was a deep part of him from a very early age. Only a thorough self-promoter would bother making himself taller than he really was in his passport and in photos.

As this passage states, not all magicians admire Houdini’s skills with magic, but all magicians admire his skills as a showman.

This discovery that Houdini made was central to his career. He found out that even though he was doing the same magic tricks, if he could engage the public and get them involved in his act, he would get much more attention and attract much more interest. This amounts to the discovery that showmanship was more important to his career than magic.



## Debatable Issue #1: Showman vs. Magician

### Position

Harry Houdini's success and fame was the result of his skills as a magician. His showmanship was a distant second.

### Argumentative Claims (reasons that the position is true)

One mark of Houdini's genius as a magician is that there is still mystery about how he performed some of his tricks.

Houdini's most famous magic tricks were performed with exceptional skill.

At the crucial turning points in his career, Houdini came through with brilliant magic.

### Evidence (reference to the text that supports the claim)

"The [Chinese Water Torture Cell] escape was a 1912 sensation! Houdini was to perform this marvel once or twice a day for the rest of his life. He had few imitators. The escape didn't baffle magicians; it scared them. As a famous Broadway magician, the late Doug Henning, said publicly, 'If you want to appreciate Houdini's genius, try doing his escapes'" (175-176).

At the all-important beginning of his great European tour – starting in London, England – Houdini was getting overlooked because of the fame of another magician, named White Mahatma. This is when the manager of London's largest theater laid down a challenge: if Houdini could escape from Scotland Yard handcuffs, he would book him and promote the show all over England. Houdini escaped the Scotland Yard handcuffs (70-71).

"Houdini was the grand guru of magic. He didn't need the unseen assistance of sprites, spirits, and imps" (6).

"When Houdini reached the Golden Gate he had re-created himself as a three-trick magician – Indian needle swallowing, handcuffs, and the sub trunk. Each was dynamite. Within days, he shook San Francisco like an earthquake" (65).

"It was 1918, and Houdini was booked into the enormous New York Hippodrome, a theater holding more than five thousand patrons. With the announcement that he intended to vanish a 10,000-pound Asian elephant, he filled every seat. . . . Even today magicians disagree on how he did



it and offer conflicting methods. Mirror? Double walls? Black art? One of the guesses is bound to be right – but which? One thing is certain. The elephant didn’t go up Houdini’s sleeve” (141-143).

**Reasoning (explanation as to *how* the evidence supports the claim)**

Making an elephant disappear in front of 5,000 people is probably Houdini’s most amazing magic trick. It seems unbelievable, and Fleischman’s biography, as this passage implies, doesn’t reveal the secret, other than to imply it was brilliant magicianship.

This story is significant and revealing because it shows that it was proficiency as a magician that mattered most. If Houdini wasn’t able to break out of the English police department’s handcuffs, he never would have gotten to perform in London’s most important theatrical venue. Here again, this incident points to the brilliance of Houdini’s magic as what really impressed people.

Houdini’s tour out west early in his career was an extremely important one. The leading theatrical agent Martin Beck persuaded Houdini to focus his act on a smaller number of his best tricks, and that worked. The magic was all brilliant and Houdini had a major success on this trip, boosting his career.

Sid Fleischman’s biography *Escape!* shows that one way Houdini had of distancing himself from imitators was by making his escape scenarios increasingly difficult and dangerous. The Chinese Water Torture Cell escape trick may have been the pinnacle of this process. Other magicians recognized that it took so much skill to do that if they tried it they might hurt or kill themselves.

*Escape!* tells us that people were so impressed by Houdini’s biggest magic tricks that some of them thought that he was able to use supernatural beings or forces into his act. But of course it wasn’t these, it was his technical skill that made his act so great.



## Debatable Issue #2: Did Houdini's Identity Change?

### **Position**

Harry Houdini's identity stayed fundamentally the same throughout his life, despite his ascent from humble beginnings to worldwide stardom.

### **Argumentative Claims (reasons that the position is true)**

Another consistent theme in Houdini's life was that appearances were not the same as reality.

Despite the challenges he faced growing up poor, Houdini maintained a very close relationship to his family.

Houdini demonstrated throughout his whole life an extraordinary determination to succeed.

### **Evidence (reference to the text that supports the claim)**

Harry Houdini's first major action in his life was to run away from home in Wisconsin at the age of 13. He escaped from home. Then throughout his adult life, he would become the most famous escape artist of all time (19).

Shortly after Houdini began magic at the age of 9, he made up a fake story that he performed a trapeze act in which he picked up needles off the ground with his eyelids. In the middle of his career he told a variety of untrue stories that helped build his legend, including one about his surviving an escape stunt under ice in the frozen Detroit River (111-113).

"The answer to his toil is that he was born running. He seemed incapable of restrained interest and halfway enthusiasms. He was driven to become the world's greatest magician or none at all" (166).

"One can see in these early triumphs [in sports] his determination to excel at any endeavor. For the rest of his life, he regarded being second best as a punishment" (22).

"Houdini was inconsolable, not for the next weeks, but for the rest of his life. Once back in New York, he lingered day after day at his mother's grave" (134).



**Reasoning (explanation as to *how* the evidence supports the claim)**

As Fleischman states here, Houdini had a very high energy level and an absolute commitment to be the best at whatever he did all throughout his life. As the author says, this was part of his identity since birth.

Houdini had a great talent for image-building. He really created the story of Houdini, which was much bigger and more interesting than the actual reality of Houdini. And he began doing this as a boy and continued on doing it (and very successfully) as a man.

This quotation make it clear that Houdini’s incredible success as a magician was rooted in the complete dedication to do whatever it took, and the powerful determination to succeed, that he demonstrated as a boy playing football and other sports. More than anything else, this “will to win” made Houdini who he was, and it never changed.

Houdini didn’t always make it obvious, but he was devoted to his family throughout his entire life. His deep and undying love for his mother, in particular, was apparent by his tremendous grief when she passed away. He was extremely close to her throughout his life, and that relationship had a very big influence on him.

The constant escapes were one way that in Houdini’s life appearances didn’t match reality. With Houdini, it was always “now you see it, now you don’t.” It is really amazing that the pattern for his life-long role as an escape artist was started when he barely a teen.





## Debatable Issue #2: Did Houdini's Identity Change?

### **Position**

Harry Houdini's identity underwent a profound change during the course of his highly successful life and career.

### **Argumentative Claims (reasons that the position is true)**

Houdini became someone else when he became a magician.

Fame and the quest for fame changed Houdini's identity.

Another one of the most significant changes that Houdini underwent was his late-life crusade against what might be called phony magic.

### **Evidence (reference to the text that supports the claim)**

Late in his life, and after becoming internationally famous as a magician, Houdini became a crusader against "such fortune-telling hustles as palmistry, tea-leaf reading, phrenology, astrology, crystal gazing, and other delusional pastimes" (166).

"The book [*The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*, written by Houdini in 1908] is dazzling with riches, while at the same time it is petty, sanctimonious, insolent, sneering, and tormented. It is also astonishingly hypocritical" (126).

"[Houdini] became arrogant, self-worshipful, and demanding. In the words of the poet Robert Browning, he had 'an itch for the praise of fools.' His conceit was expanding like a supernova" (76).

Harry Houdini was born with the name Ehrich Weiss, but as a young adult and a new magician he changed his name. He also claimed to have been born in the American Midwest (in Wisconsin), but actually he was born in Eastern Europe (Budapest, Hungary) (12-15).

"While his name had become as recognizable as that of Napoleon, of Shakespeare, of Lincoln, the former carnival magician feared slipping back into obscurity. He understood that fame needed constant renewal, and he went at it with ingenuity and furious energy" (8).



**Reasoning (explanation as to *how* the evidence supports the claim)**

As this passage shows, Houdini felt the need to constantly change his performance as a magician, in order to stay on top. This included changes to his stage presence and his image as a performer, which were important parts of his identify.

There can be no denying that Houdini changed his identify, since he even changed his name and birthplace, two of the most essential aspects of who a person is. If he hadn't changed his identify, the world's most famous magician would have been Erich Weiss from Hungary, not Harry Houdini from America.

This passage underlines how deep an impact fame had on Houdini's character. As a child and teenager, Houdini was a humble, hard-working person, who was happy despite being poor. After he became famous, however, he became a different person. He insisted on luxurious living, and he thought that he was better than everyone else, especially than every other magician.

The idea that Houdini, who took his very name from his childhood idol Robert-Houdin, would attack and insult the French magician in print is shocking. He became so much like this magician that he admired when growing up, and then he turned on him and sought to destroy his reputation. This was a big change.

It seems strange when you think about it that Houdini became so passionate about exposing the deception in these kinds of popular activities of the time. Fortune telling is not so different than Houdini's own magic. There are several possible explanations for it (one being that he simply wanted to eliminate all rivals to his status as the world's greatest magician), but whatever the cause his hostility to other forms of magic was a major change in his identify.