

Harry Houdini

by Laura Lodge

Printable text • Modelling slides • Photocopiable text and questions • pages 170 to 173

No magician has provoked more interest than the great Harry Houdini. Although most famous for his daring escapes and stunts, Houdini started out with simple magic tricks. This short biography traces his life from childhood to the end of his career, and describes some of his most memorable tricks, such as his escape from a straightjacket while hanging upside down! You could make links with the [Unit 18](#) text once both units have been completed.

1 Get ready

Discuss the **Key vocabulary** identified in the **Language toolkit** and then complete the vocabulary activities as desired. Please note that the selected vocabulary is a guide. Depending on the needs of your cohort, additional vocabulary discussion may be beneficial before, during and after reading. Next, display the text (pages 170 to 171) so the children can see the title and any illustrations, and encourage the children to discuss the following questions before reading.

- This text is a biography. What is a biography? What features might you find in one?
Answers will vary depending on the children's prior reading. A simple definition of a biography is a text that tells the story of a person's life. Possible features to discuss include: factual content, usually in chronological order; subheadings; written in the third person.
- The text is about a magician, illusionist and escapologist called Harry Houdini. What do you know about these professions? Have you ever heard of Harry Houdini?
The children are likely to be familiar with the term 'magician' but may need to discuss the differences between a magician and an illusionist or escapologist (the **Reading list** contains some useful resources). It is a good idea to gauge what, if anything, they know about Houdini. You could discuss possible questions they have about him that they hope will be answered by the text.
- Harry Houdini was famous for doing magic tricks. Have you ever seen a magic trick being performed? Have you ever done a magic trick yourself?
It is likely that the children will have seen a friend or professional do a magic trick at some point, or they may have watched a magic show on television. To support their understanding, you could share some video clip examples, such as those from *Help! My School Trip Is Magic* (see the **Reading list**).

Language toolkit

Key vocabulary

destitute	errands	escapades
escapologists	fraudulent	freight
illusionists	optical illusion	quelled
signature	sleight of hand	tonne

Vocabulary discussion questions

- Can people who are not escapologists still have escapades? Why?
- If someone is **destitute**, what things do they not have?
- What **errands** might someone need to run each week?
- Which animals might weigh a **tonne**?
- If someone is **fraudulent**, what are they doing?

Vocabulary activities

- Escapades** and **escapologists** both come from the Latin *ex*, meaning 'out of' and *cappa*, meaning 'cloak'. Discuss the links between the Latin origins and the modern words.
- Discuss the difference between an illusion and an **optical illusion**. **Optical** comes from the Greek *optos* meaning 'seen' and relates to vision or sight. Challenge the children to think of an associated word (e.g. 'optician').
- Nouns that denote a person who practises a certain custom, occupation or belief often end with the suffix '-ist' (e.g. **illusionist**). How many similar nouns can the children find that end in '-ist'?

2 First steps

Read the text together and then encourage the children to discuss the following questions.

- What was Harry Houdini's real name?
Erik Weisz. For much of the text, Houdini is named using the Americanised form of his name, so some children may answer 'Ehrich Weiss'. Explain that this is a changed form of Houdini's original name that he adopted because it was easier for English speakers to pronounce.
- Why did Ehrich start performing in the circus?
To support his family because they were destitute/poor. This meant that even the children in the family needed to work so that they had enough money to live.
- What were three of Houdini's most famous tricks?
Jennie the vanishing elephant; escaping from a straightjacket upside down; breaking free from a locked box underwater. If the children struggle, direct them to the panel on the second page of the text, which describes Houdini's tricks.

3 Explore

- When Houdini was a child, he had to do odd jobs to support his family. Explain that during the late 19th century, many children had to work and earn money for their families rather than go to school. In Britain, education was only made compulsory in 1880 and, even then, children only had to attend school between the ages of 5 and 10. Discuss the children's opinions on this issue with reference to Houdini's experiences. Would they prefer to work or go to school? Do they think today's education system is better or worse than that of 1880?
- The children could research simple magic tricks, (see **Reading list**) such as those using cards and coins, which Houdini himself enjoyed before he moved on to more dangerous stunts. They could learn their favourite trick to perform in front of another class.
- The text mentions Houdini's influence on magicians today. You could discuss the work of some modern magicians (be mindful that some tricks performed by David Blaine and Derren Brown may not be suitable for a young audience). The children might also enjoy learning about the high-wire artist Philippe Petit (see **Reading list**).

4 Skills focus

See pages 168 to 169

Use the information from the **Skills guide** and the relevant **Skills graphic** to introduce the skill of retrieval.

- Model the skill using the **Unit 17 Modelling slides** and the **Modelling retrieval** guidance on page 168.
- The children can then attempt the **Retrieval** questions on page 172.
- Finally, the **Mix it up!** questions on page 173 offer practice in a range of comprehension skills.

Answers and marking guidance for all questions are included on pages 168 to 169.

5 Where next?

- Speaking and listening task:** The children could work in small groups to create a presentation about Houdini. This could be done using PowerPoint® or they could even create a short biographical film. They could use photographs, drawings and puppetry alongside narration to depict the key events from Houdini's life.
- Writing task:** Although Houdini's tricks were thrilling to watch, many of them were incredibly dangerous. Ask the children to each write an argument for or against Houdini's stunts. Half the class could write in favour and half against.

Reading list

Fiction

- ▶ *The Magic Misfits* by Neil Patrick Harris
- ▶ *The Nowhere Emporium* by Ross MacKenzie (Linked text: [Unit 18](#))
- ▶ *Young Houdini: The Magician's Fire* by Simon Nicholson
- ▶ *The Young Magicians and the Thieves' Almanac* by Nick Mohammed

Class reads

- ▶ *The Houdini Box* by Brian Selznick

Non-fiction

- ▶ *Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini* by Sid Fleischman
- ▶ *Illusionology* by Albert Schafer

Films

- ▶ You could show clips from *Man on Wire* (Magnolia Pictures, 2008).

Websites

- ▶ The CBBC YouTube channel offers some video clips from the TV series *Help! My School Trip Is Magic*.



Modelling retrieval

See Unit 17 Modelling slides

Use the Skills guide (see pages 16 to 17) and the downloadable Skills graphic to support your modelling.

1 Look at the paragraph beginning *Harry Houdini was born ...*. Where did Erik emigrate from? Tick one.

Budapest Wisconsin New York City United States of America

Model using the locator to find the correct paragraph. You could discuss the meaning of 'emigrate' before scanning the text for it. Demonstrate reading around this word, as the pertinent information is in the previous sentence. If the children suggest 'United States of America', discuss the difference between immigration and emigration, and draw attention to the wording of the question ('emigrate from').

2 Look at the paragraph beginning *Harry Houdini was born ...*. Give two things Ehrich did because he loved the stage.

1 practising gymnastics/acrobatics 2 reading about magic at the library

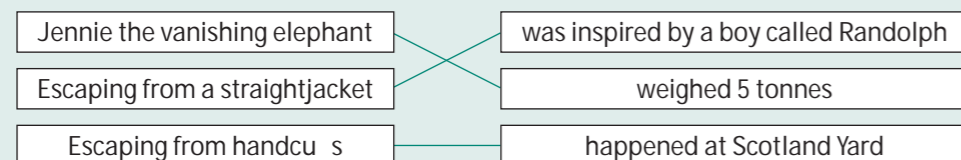
Again, model using the locator and scanning for the question's key words (e.g. 'loved the stage') in the text. Establish that the question refers to 'Ehrich' because this is the name Erik took when he got to the United States. Find the relevant sentence and model reading around it to look for clues. If the children suggest Ehrich's performance in the circus troupe, explain that this *caused* his love of the stage, rather than resulting from it.

3 Look at the paragraph beginning *After spending a year ...*. Why was Houdini given the nickname 'The Handcuff King'?

Because he escaped from handcuffs in a locked cell in Scotland Yard.

The nickname given to Harry is reproduced exactly in the text, but it is still important to model scanning carefully for these key words. You could also model reading around them in the text, explaining that you need to use the text rather than making an inference based only on the nickname.

4 Think about the whole text. Draw lines to match each trick to the relevant fact.



Draw attention to the fact that this question is about the whole text and explain that you will need to scan the entire text to find the information that you need to correctly match the tricks and facts. Model identifying key words from the first trick and scanning the text to find the corresponding information. It is a good idea to physically model drawing a clear matching line between the trick and relevant fact. Repeat this process for the remaining tricks.

Retrieval questions mark scheme

See page 172

Answer	Guidance
1 for a better life	The children may use a direct quotation to answer or paraphrase the text (e.g. 'They wanted to get better jobs'). Either is acceptable. Award 1 mark for a reference to the family moving for a better life.
2 He bought and resold newspapers. <i>OR</i> He polished shoes. <i>OR</i> He ran errands. <i>OR</i> He joined a circus troupe.	Some may respond vaguely (e.g. 'He worked lots of jobs'). If so, encourage them to make their answer more specific. Award 1 mark for any two correct answers.

Answer	Guidance						
3 (an agent called) Martin Beck	This is a challenging question as the children need to use some vocabulary as well as retrieval knowledge. You could discuss synonyms for 'noticed' and 'gifted' before the children attempt this question. Award 1 mark for a reference to Martin Beck. Partial names should not be accepted.						
4 It was nailed shut. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> He had to wear leg irons. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Although all the options are plausible, the incorrect options are only found within other sections of the text. If necessary, prompt the children to draw their answer from the panel on the second page of the text. Award 1 mark for both correct answers ticked.						
5 <table border="1" style="margin-left: 20px;"> <tbody> <tr> <td>Harry's name when he was born</td> <td>Erik Weisz</td> </tr> <tr> <td>his age when he changed his name to Harry Houdini</td> <td>17</td> </tr> <tr> <td>his age when he died</td> <td>52</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Harry's name when he was born	Erik Weisz	his age when he changed his name to Harry Houdini	17	his age when he died	52	This question requires the children to retrieve information from across the whole text. Some of them may benefit from being given locators for each statement. Award 1 mark for two sections completed correctly. Award 2 marks for all sections completed correctly.
Harry's name when he was born	Erik Weisz						
his age when he changed his name to Harry Houdini	17						
his age when he died	52						

Mix it up! questions mark scheme

See page 173

Answer	Guidance
1 daring	The children may not have encountered the word 'bold' to describe a character or event. If necessary, discuss the meaning of this word before they attempt this question. Award 1 mark for the correct answer. Skill: Word meaning.
2 Childhood <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Remind the children that they need to find the main point of the whole section. The answer options are all mentioned in the named paragraph, but only the correct answer is a summary of the entire paragraph. Award 1 mark for the correct answer ticked. Skill: Summarising.
3 At the start of his career his tricks were a lot safer but later in his career they got much more dangerous.	Some children may benefit from a locator for Houdini's early career (the paragraph beginning <i>After spending a year ...</i>). Remind them to refer to both sides of the comparison in their response. Award 1 mark for a reference to Houdini's tricks becoming more dangerous. Skill: Comparison.
4 To make you think about how Harry is still important today.	This question requires the children to think about themselves as readers of the text. You could discuss their reactions to the final sentence before they attempt this question. Does the sentence make them want to find out more? Does it make them want to read on? Does it make the subject more relevant to their lives today? Award 1 mark for a plausible opinion linked to the text. Skill: Relationship.
5 Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Because he had a love of the stage from childhood so he enjoyed performing. Also, he kept thinking of more interesting stunts – you wouldn't do this if you didn't enjoy it.	The children's responses will depend on their personal opinions. Although it is more plausible to infer that Houdini enjoyed his job, accept negative answers as long as appropriate evidence is given to justify the opinion. Award 1 mark for an opinion with one piece of appropriate evidence. Award 2 marks for an opinion with two pieces of appropriate evidence. Skill: Inference.

Harry Houdini, by Laura Lodge

This is a short biography of the famous magician and escapologist Harry Houdini, who lived from 1874 to 1926.

Harry Houdini's daring escapades made him one of the most famous escape artists to have ever lived, and his name is still recognised all over the world today.

Harry Houdini was born Erik Weisz in Budapest, Hungary, on 24th March 1874. At the age of four, Erik and his family emigrated to the United States of America, looking for a better life. The family changed their names to make them easier to pronounce: 'Weisz' became 'Weiss' and 'Erik' became 'Ehrich'. The Weiss family were almost destitute, relying on charity and the odd jobs the children took to make a little money. Ehrich bought and resold newspapers, polished shoes and ran errands – anything to support his family. Eventually, Ehrich's willingness to help his family out by doing anything and everything led to his first performance, when he joined his friend's circus troupe. Performing as 'Ehrich, Prince of the Air', nine-year-old Ehrich showed skill on the trapeze and a love of the stage was born. For a few years, Ehrich's urge to perform was quelled by practising gymnastics, acrobatics and reading up on the art of magic at the public library. But at the age of 12, Ehrich suddenly left home, riding off on a freight train in search of adventure.

After spending a year away from home, Ehrich returned to help his family, working various jobs while still trying to make money from his true passion, magic. Around the age of 17, Ehrich Weiss became Harry Houdini. Harry and his brother Dash became 'The Brothers Houdini', performing magic tricks and sleight of hand, but when they were not very successful, Harry started to experiment as an escape artist. Eventually, an agent called Martin Beck recognised Harry's talent and arranged for him to tour Europe with his escape act. When Harry successfully escaped from handcuffs in a locked cell at Scotland Yard during a stay in London, his fame was secured, and he gained a new nickname: 'The Handcuff King'.

Jennie the vanishing elephant

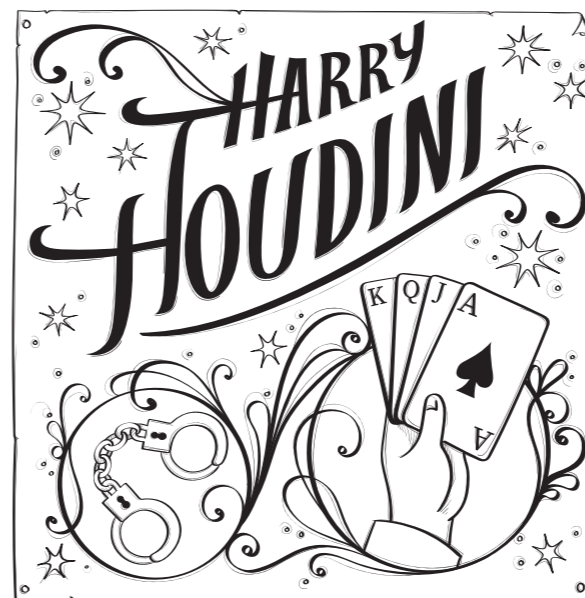
One of Harry's most famous tricks involved the apparent disappearance of a 5-tonne elephant called Jennie. The audience was amazed when Jennie disappeared right in front of their eyes. In reality, the cabinet Jennie disappeared into was huge and this, coupled with the fact that the stage was the largest on Earth, produced an optical illusion. Jennie never left the stage; instead, she just walked to the other end of the cabinet!

Escaping from a straightjacket upside down

Many pictures of Harry show him being hung upside down locked in a straightjacket. This trick was inspired by a young boy Harry met while touring in Sheffield, Randolph Osborne Douglas. The 'suspended straightjacket escape' became his signature trick and involved him being locked in a straightjacket and hung upside down from a building or a crane.

Breaking free from a locked box underwater

In 1912, having been put in handcuffs and leg irons, Harry climbed into a box which was nailed shut, weighed down and thrown into a river. He managed to achieve what looked impossible, by escaping in just 57 seconds without even breaking the box!



Harry continued to perform in his later life. He kept busy, acting in movies, learning to fly aeroplanes and even working to expose fraudulent psychics, before dying in 1926 at the age of 52. His work inspired some of the most famous magicians, escapologists and illusionists today, such as David Blaine and Derren Brown.



Retrieval

Name: _____

- 1 Look at the paragraph beginning *Harry Houdini was born ...*. Why did the Weisz family move to the United States of America?

_____ 1 mark

- 2 Give **two** ways Ehrich helped to support his family.

1 _____

2 _____ 1 mark

- 3 Look at the paragraph beginning *After spending a year ...*. Who first noticed how gifted Harry was?

_____ 1 mark

- 4 What made Houdini's locked box trick so dangerous? Tick **two**.

It was nailed shut.

He had to wear a straightjacket.

He had to wear leg irons.

It was put in a cage.

He was tied up with ropes.

1 mark

- 5 Complete the table with information from the text.

Harry's name when he was born	
His age when he changed his name to Harry Houdini	
His age when he died	

2 marks

Mix it up!

Name: _____

- 1 Look at the paragraph beginning *Harry Houdini was born ...*. Find and copy **one** word that shows that Houdini's tricks were bold.

_____ 1 mark

- 2 Look at the paragraph beginning *Harry Houdini was born ...*. What would be the most effective subheading for this section of the text? Tick **one**.

Changing names

Childhood

Moving to America

Joining the circus

1 mark

- 3 Compare Harry's tricks at the start of his career with those later in his career. Give **one** difference.

_____ 1 mark

- 4 *His work inspired some of the most famous magicians, escapologists and illusionists today, such as David Blaine and Derren Brown.* Why do you think the biography ends in this way?

_____ 1 mark

- 5 Think about the whole text. Do you think Harry enjoyed his work? Tick **one**.

Yes No

Give **two** pieces of evidence from the text to support your opinion.

_____ 2 marks