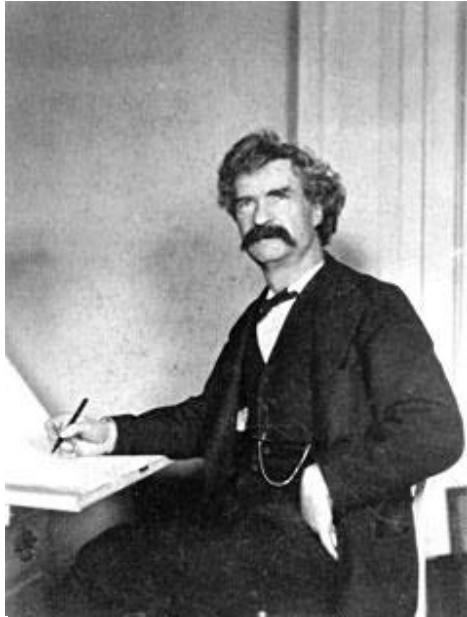


## A Report from the 21st Century

### Student Activity



**Mark Twain, c. 1884** Courtesy The Mark Twain House, Hartford

***“The old saw says, ‘Let a sleeping dog lie.’ Right. Still, when there is much at stake it is better to get a newspaper to do it.”***

– **Mark Twain**

At fourteen, Samuel Clemens got a job at the *Hannibal Journal* newspaper working for his older brother Orion. The experience lured young Sam into the world of words and ideas. He even began to write humorous sketches to make the paper more lively:

*Hannibal Journal, May 6, 1853*

**TERRIBLE ACCIDENT!  
500 MEN KILLED AND MISSING!!**

*We had set the above head up, expecting (of course) to use it, but as the accident hasn’t happened, yet, we’ll say – To be Continued.*

Clemens loved living the life of a newspaper reporter, a life populated by “a bunch of talented, wild men improvising a whole new newspaper art form with tall tales and lies and hoaxes and great writing,” according to Twain biographer Ron Powers. Clemens himself wrote: “To find a petrified man... or cave an imaginary mine, or discover some dead Indians in a Gold Hill tunnel... were feats and calamities that we never hesitated about devising when the public needed matters of thrilling interest for breakfast.”

**Part A.** Mark Twain’s fame as a humorist – and a master of vernacular dialogue or common, everyday language – began one day during the winter of 1864-65 when he listened to a story about a gambler who would bet on anything, even his jumping frog. Twain embellished it into a much more elaborate and funny story. Published in November 1865, it was quickly reprinted in papers around the country and later republished in Twain’s first book as “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.”

Later, Twain became an overseas correspondent, writing from Hawaii, the Middle East, and Europe. Twain poked fun at everything. In Paris he reported that he went to see young women dance the can-can: “I placed my hands before my face for very shame,” he told his readers, “but I looked through my fingers.” The book about his travels, *The Innocents Abroad*, sold 100,000 copies by 1871; only *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had sold more in the same two years’ time. Twain’s publisher began promoting him as “The People’s Author.”

Choose an experience you have had and write your own “report from 21<sup>st</sup>-century America” on the back of this sheet. Exaggerate and embellish your story using the kind of attention to detail and comic twists Twain was noted for, but be sure you make it “believable” enough that your reader *might* think it is true.

Now write a second version as if you had posted it on an Internet message board. Share both versions of your story with your classmates and discuss the differences between them. Some people think the Internet offers the same opportunities for exaggeration and falsehood that Twain took advantage of at the *Hannibal Journal*. Decide on your views and debate them with your classmates. Can truth be found reliably on the Internet? What about “reality” TV?

**Part B.** Twain often included a shortened version of the jumping frog story in his lectures and readings, his deadpan delivery making it even funnier. He understood that an audience was much more likely to laugh at his stories if he gave no indication that he understood the underlying meaning or humor. Twain was also the master of the pause.

One night he walked out on stage, stared at the audience and said nothing. As the silence continued, tension built until someone in the crowd snickered. Soon the whole audience was convulsed in laughter and America's favorite storyteller knew the audience was his.

**MARK TWAIN**

(Honolulu Correspondent of the Sacramento Union)

Will Deliver A Lecture on the Sandwich Islands...

**A SPLENDID ORCHESTRA**

is in town, but has not been engaged;

also

**A DEN OF FEROCIOUS WILD BEASTS**

will be on exhibition in the next block.

**MAGNIFICENT FIREWORKS**

were in contemplation for this occasion,

but the idea has been abandoned.

**A GRAND TORCHLIGHT PROCESSION**

may be expected; in fact, the public are

privileged to expect whatever they please.

*Doors open at 7 o'clock      The Trouble to begin at 8*

What similar techniques do today's stand-up comics such as Jon Stewart, Chris Rock or Margaret Cho use? Choose a favorite comedian and look at his or her technique. Would their material be as funny if they changed their style?

Now, imagine that you are a writer for *Saturday Night Live*, where sketches are often based on real events or personalities in the news. On the back of this sheet, describe your idea for a comedy sketch for next week's show. Be prepared to "pitch" your idea – explain how the sketch will unfold and convince the other writers (your classmates) that your idea is funny.