



Philosophy  
Circles

## Horrible history?

*In my opinion, the Horrible Histories television programmes contain some of the best comic writing out there. Terry Deary's original books are masterful. As a former History teacher, they injected bounce into many a lesson, regardless of the class' age. They also raise questions on the relationship between comedy and historical tragedy.*



Pair up pupils and ask them to debate which of two historical periods was more horrible. If you have the books to hold up as you call out, even better!

e.g. *Vicious Vikings* or *Stormin' Normans*, or *Angry Aztecs* or *Terrible Tudors*.



Using some volunteers, perform the stimulus as a piece of Readers' Theatre (script in hand).

Janey - We wouldn't want people joking about today's tragedies, so it's not fair to joke about the past,

Chris – Maybe some things can be joked about, others not

Andy – if enough time passes, anything can become fair game,

Morgan – Books like Horrible Histories are there to entertain, and we should leave it at that.

Let them discuss in pairs before using a 'Magnet' (p. 26) activity to assess each point of view. Do they have any other ideas? (I've deliberately excluded mention of black comedy and gallows humour, in the hope pupils will raise these concepts themselves).

From assessing the points, it is likely some of these questions will arise:

- Is it more acceptable to joke about the past than the present?
- Can we make jokes about sad things if it increases people's interest in them?
- Should acceptability of jokes be determined by time, or content? Or both?
- When should jokes be taken seriously? When should they be not be taken seriously?
- Are some kinds of jokes more acceptable than others?



They could progress to a meeting of Horrible Histories writers/actors from 2250, who are writing their new book "*The Tricky Twenty First Century*". Add the twist of several representatives – from now, the future, and those being written about.

If the class have come to a consensus, put their principle put the test with some real life events. For example, if they have said 200 years must pass before jokes can be made, does this give their Great Grandchildren licence to joke about the Holocaust?

NEXT STEPS  
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Pupils could use their opinions to construct a guide to writing a Horrible Histories book. They should consider what can and cannot be joked about, and what kind of jokes are acceptable.

Enter **JANEY, CHRIS, MORGAN AND ANDY**

- JANEY** Be an actor for Horrible Histories, they said. You'll be on TV, they said. I thought I'd love it. But I'm starting to wonder if it's not so funny.
- CHRIS** What's not so funny?
- JANEY** People having their heads cut off. Or being killed in war. Or dying of plague.
- CHRIS** Well. They're not naturally funny things. But it's the way they write the scripts.
- JANEY** Oh, the scripts are excellent. But I sometimes imagine what it was really like for people at the time. They can't have found it that funny.
- CHRIS** I guess not. But they're just jokes. You're not meant to take them seriously.
- MORGAN** Exactly. History was so boring when I was at school. We're making history fun for kids! The jokes bring history to life!
- ANDY** It's just a job. Beats being Iggle-Piggle at Alton Towers. Anyway, it all happened so long ago so, everyone's dead. They're not going to complain, are they?
- JANEY** World War II isn't so long ago. I've got a scene about making fart noises with a gas mask coming up. When is the line between stuff we can joke about, and stuff we can't?
- ANDY** Maybe once everyone who knows anyone from the time is gone. Perhaps World War II is a bit soon.
- JANEY** But do you think it's OK if people in the future make jokes about people now dying in terrorist attacks?
- ANDY** I won't be there. So who cares?
- CHRIS** I think some things in history are alright to joke about, just not everything.
- MORGAN** We'll be history if we don't get changed for the next scene. Where's my wig?

*Exit all*