

Mary Poppins Related Ideas



You can get ideas for comedy from all over the place: things you see, hear and do can all be turned into funny stories, musings or activities.

In our workshops, we have been able to get a lot of mileage out of P. L. Travers' magical nanny, thinking about the books and the Disney films, as well as the stage musical.

WHAT *IS* SHE?

We know that Mary Poppins has magical powers, is friends with lots of different people, can speak to animals, and has family members with odd traits or skills (laughing until they float, for example, or living in a topsy turvy world). Her umbrella handle can talk. Her carpet bag seems to have a very strong extension charm on it, as it can carry around objects far larger than the container itself.

Can you make up a story to explain who she is, and how she got her powers?

DID SHE HAVE FORMAL MAGICAL TRAINING?

Mary Poppins seems like someone who either got expelled from a school of witchcraft and wizardry, or who graduated with top marks in absolutely everything. Can you imagine her at Hogwarts, Miss Cackle's Academy or Unseen University in Ankh-Morpork? What happened there?

WHAT ELSE IS SHE UP TO!?

In the stories, Mary Poppins stays with the Banks family for a while, looking after the children, then disappears off to do her own thing. Can you think of what she might be doing? Does she have another job? Is she on holiday? Be as silly as you like.

BOOKS, FILMS AND THE STAGE

A great way in to a comedy idea is to think "if _____ is true, then what else could be true?" P.L. Travers' stories about a magical nanny became a film in 1964, and then a sequel in 2018. Which is a still greater gap than that between Top Gun (1986) and Top Gun: Maverick (2022) Can you think of any other movies which could have a sequel 50+ years later? Would the characters have aged? What would they be doing?

In 2004, a stage show version of Mary Poppins premiered in London. Can you think of any other books which have been turned into movies, which would make a funny idea for a stage show? Maybe think about a long literary classic, something very dry and worthy, being turned into a musical extravaganza, as the contrast is so gloriously stupid.

A WELL KNOWN NAME

Mary Poppins is a character who most people have heard of, which makes her very useful for comedians, who can trust that almost everybody in their audience will understand a reference to her. Many many people have seen the films she's in, watched the stage show and/or read the books about her. Can you think of anyone else who is so well-known? Darth Vader, James Bond, Winnie The Pooh, Thor, Wonder Woman and Aslan The Lion are some good examples to start you off.

FAMOUS ENOUGH TO BE A RECOGNISABLE SILHOUETTE

One way of knowing a character design is successful is if you can identify them just from their silhouette, their outline filled in with a block of colour. Mary Poppins is one such example, as she is known for her parrot-handled umbrella, carpet bag, and ability to fly.

Can you draw other silhouettes of other characters, which people will recognise? Think about cartoons in films by Disney, Pixar or Dreamworks, as well as the likes of The Simpsons, Spongebob Squarepants or Peppa Pig. The characters might be from video games as well as movies or TV shows: you'd know Super Mario or Sonic The Hedgehog just from their outline.



MARY AND HER FRIENDS

Some of the well-known and easily-recognisable fictional characters could themselves be in a Mary Poppins story: in one of P.L. Travers' books, Mary and the children meet Robinson Crusoe from the Daniel Defoe novel, and Old King Cole from the nursery rhyme. Can you imagine the magical nanny meeting any other characters from other stories & franchises? What would happen?

NOMINATIVE DETERMINISM

Mr Banks works in a bank. Where else could he work, with that name? And what other job could he have had, with a different surname?

MAKING UP YOUR OWN BACKSTORY

In the 1964 film, Mary Poppins is already known to the waiter penguins inside the chalk picture – can you imagine how they met? And indeed, how talking cartoon birds managed to get hired as a café staff?

When the Banks family's cook sees the sweeps singing and dancing around the nice clean house she yells "aargh, they're at it again!" and promptly tries to hit one with a frying pan – can you imagine how many times this has happened before?

The Banks' next-door neighbour, Admiral Boom, sets off a cannon to mark the hour. Can you imagine what happens to the cannonballs? How would you gently persuade him to invest in a quieter timepiece?

In the 2023 film Puss In Boots: The Last Wish, Jack Horner – a collector of magical objects - owns a carpet bag very like Mary's own, covered in an umbrella pattern. Is it hers? How do you imagine he came to have it?

LEARNING FROM FILMS

Watching the 1964 film of Mary Poppins as a child was the first time I learned about the suffragettes, women campaigning for the right to vote. It seems amazing to get a genuine history lesson from a magical musical, but there's no reason why there shouldn't be sensible truths in among the outlandish fictions.

Is there anything sensible which YOU first learned from an otherwise silly source?
For example, the TV show Dr Who has included stories on Rosa Parks' bus boycott, Queen Victoria's children having the blood disease haemophilia, and the 1947 partition of India.

You might have first learned about London children being evacuated into the country during World War 2 from The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe, or from Bedknobs and Broomsticks.

NB You can make the genuine lesson you learned seem even more ridiculous by comparing it with something nonsensical from the same TV show or movie, e.g. "I first learned about workhouses from A Muppet Christmas Carol, a film which has a talking frog...pause his commute home to his pig wife...to ice-skate with some penguins".

Can you fill in a sentence like: "I first learned about _____ [real true fact] from _____ [film title], a film which has _____ [ludicrous detail or casting decision]".

GASLIGHTING

Every time the children try to bring up one of their magical adventures with Mary Poppins, she strongly denies they did anything of the sort, seemingly finding it rude and distasteful that her name should even be MENTIONED in connection to such nonsensical goings-on. It makes Jane and Michael feel mad as in crazy, as well as mad as in furious.

Lying to people about their own experiences, so as they question reality itself, is known as "gaslighting", because of a 1938 play called Gaslight, which was then adapted into a British-made film in 1940. In it, a husband tries to drive his wife insane, hiding her possessions and flickering their gaslights, and claiming such things aren't happening. The film was then remade in America in 1944, and the American studio tried to pretend there had never been an earlier film version, in effect gaslighting audiences ABOUT Gaslight.

The title of the play/film is now used as shorthand to describe the behaviour within.

Can you think of any film titles which you could use as a verb, where the title itself describes something about the behaviour/actions seen in the movie?

If you were to "get Shrekked", what would that involve?

If you "felt Frozen", what would you be feeling?

If a friend said your teacher was going to "be Matilda'd", what would happen?

MARY ISN'T ALWAYS NICE

Mary Poppins is very good at her job. She's also vain and conceited, always admiring her own reflection, more interested in herself and her own good ideas than anyone else. She claims to be "practically perfect in every way"; she's definitely not great at being humble or modest. But she doesn't need to be. Characters don't have to be entirely nice to be beloved. In fact, sometimes it's the less pleasant qualities which makes a character interesting to us, as well as more real.

If someone told you to be more like Mary Poppins, what of her good qualities might they want you to take on? And what might you ACTUALLY do? Maybe your teacher wants you to be clean and presentable, or help tidy up a mess, but you could imagine they want you to ride on a merry-go-round, or cause a massive problem at a bank. The gap between their expectation and your suggestion is where the funny comes in.