

More than Puppets on a String



Barbara Silverstein

Puppets serve as whimsical art objects as well as fabulous playthings. Our stick puppets are constructed to last with sturdy papier-mâché heads and fanciful wire arms for movement. They even jingle. Students in grades two through eight produced a menagerie of clever characters in six hours of class time.

The concept for each puppet is to create a head and suitable hands or paws mounted

on a stick. As often happens, students spin an initial concept into creative directions. For example, one student created a donkey resembling A.A. Milne's Eeyore, surrounded by butterflies and a fish.

Forming the Puppet Head

Papier-mâché requires plenty of preparation. We use lots of newspaper strips, along with rolls of masking tape, aluminum foil, and oak tag. I prefer liquid starch for adhesive—no mixing, no waste, and longevity. Students begin by wadding and taping newspaper sheets into desired shapes for the head. Ears, horns, and other details are made with manipulated aluminum foil and/or oak tag, and then taped onto the structure.

Papier-Mâché with Liquid Starch

Students begin layering strips of newspaper dipped in liquid starch. It is best to work with one single strip at a time, making sure both sides are evenly coated with starch. Two layers provide a strong foundation, followed by two more layers of strips. A final coat of newsprint provides a smooth

surface to paint.

During the demonstration, I stress smooth layering to avoid creating air pockets beneath

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the strips. Once every inch is covered, it is a good idea to dip your hands into starch and coat the structure one last time. Store the wet, sticky puppet heads on waxed paper labeled with students' names. The next day, rotate the heads so they can dry completely.

Preparing the Dowels

During the second class, students paint dowels with one color of acrylic paint and add their names on labels of masking tape. They can gently smooth rough spots with their fingers or fine sandpaper. To speed drying time, set the painted pieces in front of box fans. Once the dowels are dry, students can wrap colored electrical or masking tape around them diagonally.

Assembly

During our last class, we drill holes in the base of each head to accommodate the dowels, triggering in a hefty dollop of hot glue before inserting the dowels. Older students enjoy drilling under careful supervision. To animate their puppets, students cut double pairs of paws or hands from Bristol board. Make two left and two right paws or hands in order to sandwich the ends of three-foot lengths of heavy gauge wire between them. First tape half to the wire and then glue the other half on top.

Safety tip: Lengths of wire pose a safety hazard. I have students bring their paws or hands to me for taping. They return to their tables to glue the sets together once the wire ends are protected.



Final Touches


Details such as paw pads and claws are added with marker. To affix the wire to the dowel, simply wrap it around the base of the head. The wire can remain relatively straight or be coiled. Either way, the wire adds a bouncy movement to animate the puppets.

Collars of mesh fabric or nylon net add a festive touch while hiding the mechanics of the wire. I demonstrate how to fold 4 x 6" pieces of mesh in half lengthwise. Then I show how to gather the fabric by weaving a fine gauge wire through the mesh holes in a running stitch, approximately one inch from the fold. Students gather

the fabric in the middle and twist the wire around the dowel at the base of the head. The mesh will plump out in a two-tiered ruffled collar. Again, safety is a concern. We use lengths of 18" wire with tape-wrapped ends. Some puppets require a shot of hot glue to prevent the wire and collars from slipping.

Jingle bells and other found objects may also be wired or glued onto the puppets. Assorted craft materials such as pom poms, buttons, feathers, and sequins are popular additions. I feel comfortable providing my students access to cool-melt glue guns with proper instruction and supervision, but tacky glue is a good alternative.

Display

For display, we insert the dowels into blocks of Styrofoam. In the future, I plan to provide blocks of wood with drilled holes that students can decorate and keep for more permanent display. The completed puppets are irresistible folk art. 

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students use art materials and tools in a safe and responsible manner.