

## Teacher Notes: Houdini, the Master of Escape

Harry Houdini lived the classic immigrant story. He moved to the US with his poor family, worked hard in manual labor when he was young, decided to get famous, changed his name, moved into showbusiness, got rich, and, ultimately, worked himself to death.

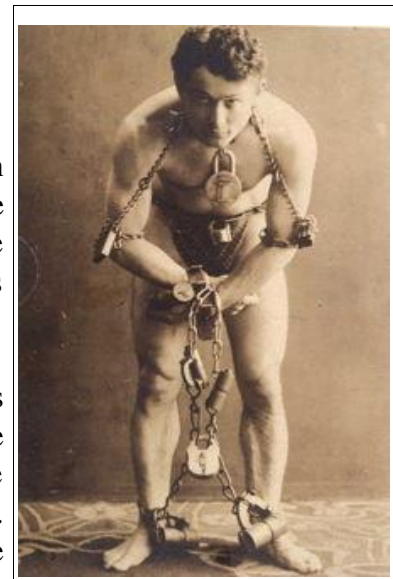
(I highly recommend the graphic novel biography, “Houdini: The Handcuff King,” which partially inspired this story.)

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# Houdini, the Master of Escape

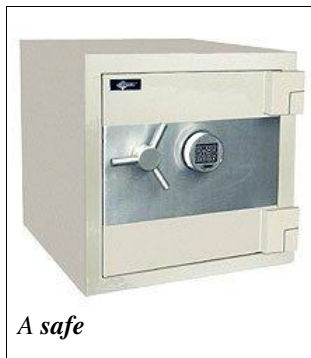
Harry Houdini could *escape* almost anything. He was born in Hungary with the name Ehrich Weisz. His father was a rabbi – he was the leader of the Jewish community in his neighborhood. The family immigrated to the US with his 4 brothers when he was 4 years old. In 1887, they moved to New York City.

He started working when he was just 10 years old. One of his first jobs was working on locks, but he also worked in a circus. He started doing magic tricks when he was 20. One of Ehrich’s favorite magicians was named “Houdin.” Ehrich Weisz was a Jewish name. He changed his name to Harry Houdini. Many people think he wanted to make his name more American.



Harry Houdini, 1874 to 1926

In 1899, Houdini became famous for escaping from *handcuffs*. He asked the police in every big city in Europe to handcuff him. He escaped every time. Once, a police officer said Houdini paid the police to open his handcuffs. Houdini sued him, and won when he opened the judge’s **safe** (see picture).



A safe

After a while, people got tired of watching Houdini escape from handcuffs. Houdini thought of a new idea. He would get handcuffed and jump into a river in the winter time, or drop into a glass box full of water. He had to escape before he *drowned*. All around the world, the name Houdini meant “escape.” Houdini exercised every day, and could hold his breath underwater for three minutes.

Houdini died in 1926. He was relaxing on a couch before a show when a college student came into his room. The student asked if Houdini could take any punch in the stomach. Houdini said yes – his body was strong from exercising every day. The college student quickly punched him hard in the stomach. Houdini wasn’t ready, and his *appendix* broke open. He was in a lot of pain. But even with a 104° fever, he put on his show. He never went to a hospital. He died a week later. It was Halloween and he was only 52 years old. Houdini moved from Europe to the US, and went from being a poor boy to a rich man, but death was the one thing he could not escape.



Handcuffs

## Vocabulary

1. *escape* – verb – To get away from something bad. “She escaped her bad marriage at 21.”
2. *drown* – verb – To die from breathing water. “I almost drowned in the ocean last year.”
3. *appendix* – noun – An organ in your body. “Your appendix can break open if you get sick.”

## Questions

1. What was Houdini's family like?

2. When did Houdini start working? What were his first jobs?



*Houdini with his mother and wife*

3. Why do you think Houdini chose his job? Why did he like it?

4. Why do you think Weisz changed his name? Do you know anyone who changed their name?

5. Why did people watch Houdini drop into water?

6. What's the American dream? Did Houdini get it?

## Famous Americans Who Changed Their Names

Original Name	New Name
Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone	Madosnna, Singer
Cassius Clay	Muhammad Ali, Boxer
Samuel Langhorne Clemens	Mark Twain, Writer
Issur Danielovitch Demsky	Kirk Douglas, Actor
Sai Fon	Bruce Lee, Actor
Jeffrey Ross Hyman	Joey Ramone, Singer
Malcolm Little	Malcolm X, Activist
Thomas Cruise Mapother	Tom Cruise, Actor
Robert Zimmerman	Bob Dylan, Singer