

TEACH BIG · A MUSICAL PLAY FOR FOURTH GRADE

Jasper B. Sharp and the Great Essay

*A dream, a pencil that comes to life, and the writing process that changes
everything*

A full length musical, about ninety minutes

For the fourth grade to perform for the whole school

Ten roles, a narrator, and a singing class

Featuring songs from the Teach BIG music catalogue

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The Cast

NARRATOR, our friendly guide, who speaks to the audience.

MAX, a fourth grader who is afraid to write.

MRS. RIVERA, Max's kind and steady teacher.

JASPER B. SHARP, a pencil who comes to life in Max's dream and becomes his guide.

TESS, Max's classmate, a confident young writer.

THE THINKING TREE, a wise, talking tree in the dream, on whom essays grow.

PROFESSOR PLAN, a busy dream character who loves to get ready before writing.

DUKE THE DRAFT, a bold, get it on the page dream character.

RUBY THE REVISER, who makes good writing stronger.

EDDIE THE EDITOR, who sweeps writing clean.

THE CLASS, an ensemble of students who become the singing voices of Max's dream.

A note on staging. The classroom is on one side of the stage. The dream world is the rest of the stage, and it can be as simple or as grand as you like, a painted tree, a few rolling desks, and a giant pencil. Stage directions appear in brackets. The songs are performed from the Teach BIG catalogue, and the whole class, and the audience, are invited to sing the choruses.

Act One

Scene One • The Classroom

[The lights come up on a fourth grade classroom. Desks in rows. A window with morning light. MRS. RIVERA writes on the board. THE CLASS files in and sits. MAX comes in last, dragging his backpack, and slumps into his seat. The NARRATOR steps into a soft spotlight at the edge of the stage.]

NARRATOR. Good morning, everyone, and welcome. This is a story about a boy, a pencil, and the biggest, scariest, most wonderful thing in the whole fourth grade. No, not the cafeteria mystery meat. I mean writing. This is Max. Max is good at a lot of things. Kickball. Drawing dragons. Remembering every fact about sharks. But there is one thing that makes Max's stomach flip like a pancake.

[MRS. RIVERA turns from the board, cheerful.]

MRS. RIVERA. Good morning, writers! I have exciting news. Today we are going to write an essay.

[THE CLASS reacts with a mix of excited and nervous sounds. MAX sinks lower in his seat.]

TESS. [raising her hand, bright] An essay? I love essays! What are we writing about, Mrs. Rivera?

MRS. RIVERA. Wonderful question, Tess. You are going to write about something you believe in. Something you could stand up and tell the whole world.

MAX. [quietly, to himself] Stand up and tell the whole world. Oh no.

NARRATOR. You see, no one had ever really shown Max how to write an essay, step by step. So to Max, a blank page did not look like a beginning. It looked like a cliff.

[MRS. RIVERA hands out paper. THE CLASS begins to write, heads down, pencils moving. MAX stares at his blank page. He picks up his pencil, sets it down, picks it up again.]

TESS. [leaning over] It's okay, Max. Just start with what you think. What do you believe in?

MAX. I believe I am going to be sick.

[MAX puts his hand on his forehead, then lays his head down on the desk, pretending to feel unwell. MRS. RIVERA notices, but kindly lets him rest. The classroom light dims. A soft, dreamy music begins. THE CLASS keeps writing in slow motion, then freezes.]

NARRATOR. And that is when the strangest, most marvelous thing happened. Max closed his eyes. And Max fell fast, fast asleep.

Scene Two • The Pencil That Came to Life

[The dream world glows to life. On MAX's desk, an enormous pencil, JASPER B. SHARP, begins to move. He stretches, yawns, and steps forward with a flourish. He is bright, kind, and full of energy. MAX lifts his head, amazed.]

MAX. Whoa. My pencil is... standing up.

JASPER B. SHARP. Standing up, sitting down, and very pleased to meet you! The name is Sharp. Jasper B. Sharp. And I am no ordinary pencil, my friend. I am the pencil that helps kids write great essays. And you, Max, look like a young writer who could use a hand.

MAX. A great essay? I can't even start one. I don't know how. Every time I try, my brain goes blank and my stomach flips.

JASPER B. SHARP. Ah. That is because nobody ever taught you the secret. Writing is not one giant scary leap. Writing is a path. A path with steps, and each step is easy when you know where to put your foot. It is called the writing process. And tonight, Max, I am going to walk it with you.

MAX. The whole thing? In one night?

JASPER B. SHARP. In one dream. Come on. Step by step. Are you ready?

MAX. [uncertain] I think so.

JASPER B. SHARP. Then let me hear you say it like you mean it. Writers ready?

[THE CLASS unfreezes and rises, becoming the singing voices of the dream. They answer Jasper with energy.]

🎵 **SONG: WRITING PROCESS DRILL**

Writers ready? WRITERS READY!

Brains switched on? BRAINS SWITCHED ON!

Step by step! WRITE IT RIGHT!

Left, left, left right left!

Writing process! STEP BY STEP!

[JASPER marches MAX across the stage as THE CLASS drills the beat. By the end, MAX is marching too, and for the first time, he is smiling.]

MAX. [breathless, grinning] Okay. Okay! That was actually kind of fun. So what is the first step?

JASPER B. SHARP. The first step, Max, is the one everybody wants to skip. And it is the one that saves you every time. We do not start by writing. We start by thinking. Follow me.

[JASPER leads MAX toward the center of the dream world. The lights shift to warm gold. Act One ends.]

Act Two

Scene One • Three Pieces to a Thesis

[The dream world opens into a bright workshop. PROFESSOR PLAN bustles in with a clipboard, measuring and muttering happily. THE THINKING TREE stands tall at center, still bare of leaves.]

PROFESSOR PLAN. Measure twice, write once! No, no, plan twice, write once! You must be the new writer. Splendid, splendid. Before we grow a single word, we must know our big idea. Max, what do you believe in? What would you stand up and tell the whole world?

MAX. [thinking hard] I guess... I believe recess is really important. Like, really important.

PROFESSOR PLAN. Marvelous! Now we shape it into a thesis. A thesis is the heart of your essay, and it comes in three little pieces.

JASPER B. SHARP. Topic, charge, and answer. Watch, Max. The topic is what you are writing about. Recess.

PROFESSOR PLAN. The charge is what the question is asking you to do. Should schools keep recess? That is a why question, so it asks for reasons.

MAX. And the answer is... yes! Yes, schools should keep recess.

JASPER B. SHARP. Put the three pieces together and you have a thesis. Schools should keep recess because it helps students learn. Max, you just built the heart of your essay.

MAX. I did? I did!

PROFESSOR PLAN. Now let the whole class help you lock it in. One, two, three!

🎵 **SONG: THREE PIECES TO A THESIS**

One, two, three! There is a thesis recipe!

One, two, three! Come and build it up with me!

Three little pieces, that is all we need,

find them, mark them, then we read!

TOPIC! CHARGE! ANSWER! One, two, three!

Three pieces to a thesis!

[THE CLASS counts on their fingers, one, two, three, as MAX holds up his thesis on a big card.]

Scene Two • The Essay Tree

[THE THINKING TREE stirs and speaks in a slow, warm voice. As the scene goes on, leaves and branches unfold, so that by the song the tree is full and green.]

THE THINKING TREE. A thesis is a seed, young writer. Plant it in good soil, and an essay grows like a tree. I should know. I am the thinking tree, and I have grown a great many.

MAX. A tree? My essay is a tree?

JASPER B. SHARP. The best way to remember it, Max. Just think of the letters T R E E S.

[DUKE THE DRAFT bounds in, sleeves rolled up, ready to work.]

DUKE THE DRAFT. Did somebody say grow? Because I am Duke, and I get ideas onto the page. Thesis at the roots. Then reasons. Then evidence. Then explanation. And way up top, the significance, why it all matters. Come on, Max, let's build it!

MAX. Reasons. Okay. Recess helps our brains rest. And recess helps us make friends. And recess gives us exercise.

DUKE THE DRAFT. Now that is a tree with strong branches! Evidence next. How do you know recess helps your brain?

MAX. Because when I come back from recess, I can actually pay attention. My teacher even says so.

THE THINKING TREE. Then explain it, young writer. Tell me why that evidence matters.

MAX. It matters because a rested brain learns better than a tired one. So recess actually helps us do better in class.

JASPER B. SHARP. Look at that, Max. Thesis, reasons, evidence, explanation. Now reach for the sky. The significance.

MAX. [standing tall] If schools keep recess, students will be happier, healthier, and ready to learn. And that is good for everybody.

[THE THINKING TREE is now in full leaf. THE CLASS gathers around it.]

🎵 **SONG: TREES**

T R E E S, grow your essay, if you please!

Thesis, Reasons, Evidence too,

Explanation, Significance, that is what strong writers do!

T R E E S, grow your essay with TREES!

[As the class sings, one student holds up each letter, T, R, E, E, S, and the tree lights up branch by branch.]

MAX. I have a whole essay. A real one. I can't believe it.

JASPER B. SHARP. Believe it. But Max, here is a secret that separates a good writer from a great one. A first draft is not the finish line. It is the starting line. Now we make it stronger.

Scene Three • Make It Stronger

[RUBY THE REVISER sweeps in, energetic, carrying a toolbox marked R E A D. She circles MAX's essay like a coach.]

RUBY THE REVISER. Ruby the Reviser, at your service! Revising is my favorite word. It means make it better, not just fix it. And I have four ways to do it. Rearrange, exchange, add, and delete. Just remember R E A D.

MAX. But my essay is already done.

RUBY THE REVISER. Done is where the fun begins! Look here. Your strongest reason, the one about our brains, is stuck at the bottom. Rearrange it. Move it up front where it can shine.

MAX. [moving a card] Okay. Strongest reason first. That does sound better.

RUBY THE REVISER. Now exchange a tired word for a strong one. You wrote recess is good. Good is a sleepy little word. What is a stronger one?

MAX. Recess is... important? Powerful?

RUBY THE REVISER. Now your sentence sits up straight! Add a detail where it is thin, and delete anything that does not belong. Watch your writing grow strong.

🎵 **SONG: MAKE IT STRONGER**

REARRANGE it! Move it around!

EXCHANGE it! A stronger word found!

ADD it! More detail, more proof!

DELETE it! Cut what I do not use!

Read it, revise it, make it strong!

[MAX and RUBY act out each move as THE CLASS sings, sliding cards, swapping words, and snipping away a sentence that does not belong.]

Scene Four • Sweep It Clean

[EDDIE THE EDITOR arrives with a little broom, brisk and precise, humming as he tidies.]

EDDIE THE EDITOR. Pencil down? Not yet, my friend! Eddie the Editor here. Ruby made your ideas strong. Now I make them clean. Editing is the last little sweep before your writing goes out into the world. Just remember E D I T.

MAX. Clean? My writing looks fine.

EDDIE THE EDITOR. Let us sweep and see. First, capital letters, standing tall at the start of every sentence. Ah, here is a lowercase r hiding at the start of recess. Stand it up. Second, end marks, catching the end of it all. This sentence ran right off the edge with no period. There we go. Third, subject and verb, do they agree? The kids runs? No, no. The kids run.

MAX. [amazed] I never noticed all that.

EDDIE THE EDITOR. That is why we sweep. So the reader never trips, and they just hear your strong ideas, clear as a bell.

🎵 **SONG: SWEEP IT CLEAN**

Sweep it, sweep it, make it clean!

Best little edit you have ever seen!

Capital letters standing tall,

end marks catching the end of it all!

E D I T, edit! You are not done till you have said it!

[THE CLASS sweeps in rhythm with little brooms as EDDIE fixes each mark on MAX's giant essay.]

MAX. [holding up his essay, glowing] It is strong. And it is clean. It is... a great essay.

JASPER B. SHARP. You wrote it, Max. Every step. I only walked beside you. And now there is one last thing a great writer has to do.

MAX. What is that?

JASPER B. SHARP. Wake up. And do it for real.

[JASPER gives MAX a warm salute. The dream music swells. The dream world slowly fades. Act Two ends.]

Act Three

Scene One • Waking Up

[The classroom light returns to morning. THE CLASS unfreezes and writes normally. MRS. RIVERA rings a small bell. MAX lifts his head from the desk, blinking.]

MRS. RIVERA. Max? Are you feeling any better, sweetheart?

MAX. [looking at his pencil, then smiling] Mrs. Rivera... I think I know how to start.

NARRATOR. And this time, when Max looked at the blank page, he did not see a cliff. He saw a path. A path with steps. And he knew exactly where to put his foot first.

[MAX picks up his pencil, JASPER, and begins to write with focus. TESS glances over and gives him a thumbs up. A short musical underscore plays as MAX writes.]

MAX. [writing, speaking as he goes] Thesis. Schools should keep recess because it helps students learn. Reasons. Evidence. Explanation. And why it matters.

Scene Two • The Presentation, and Finale

[Later. MRS. RIVERA gathers THE CLASS. It is time to share.]

MRS. RIVERA. Who would like to read their essay first? [a pause] Max? Would you like to share?

[THE CLASS turns to MAX. For a moment he hesitates. Then he stands, holding his essay, steady and proud.]

MAX. I would. Schools should keep recess, because it helps students learn. When students rest their brains, they come back ready to focus. And a school full of focused, happy students is good for everybody.

[THE CLASS bursts into applause. TESS cheers. MRS. RIVERA beams.]

TESS. Max, that was amazing! How did you do it?

MAX. [grinning, holding up his pencil] I had a little help. Step by step.

NARRATOR. And from that day on, Max was never afraid of a blank page again. Because he knew the secret. Writing is not a giant scary leap. It is a path. And every great essay, every single one, has something to say.

[The whole company gathers for the finale. THE CLASS, MAX, and all the dream characters step forward. JASPER B. SHARP raises his arms to lead. The audience is invited to sing along.]

🎵 **FINALE SONG: EVERY GREAT ESSAY**

Say it! Show it! Make it clear!

Give your reader something to hear!

Think it! Link it! Make it strong!

Every little piece belongs!

Thesis! Evidence! Explain away!

Great essays have something to say!

[The entire cast sings. On the final line, MAX lifts his essay high, and the lights blaze bright.]

[Everyone holds the last note. Blackout. The end.]