

WATER.
GUN.
ARGUMENT.

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Alan Haehnel



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Water. Gun. Argument. is a docu-theatre style play that argues whether or not students should play the squirt gun game Assassins.

Playwright Bio

Alan Haehnel teaches English at Hanover High School in Hanover, New Hampshire. With his wife, he lives across the river in Vermont. In addition to teaching and writing, Alan enjoys performance poetry, camping, and playing volleyball. He has written and published over 120 plays that have been produced across the world.

Synopsis

Michael Stebbins curates a collection of moments surrounding the seniors at his school Ratherford High playing the squirt gun elimination game Assassins. The students think it's just a joke. The Principal is against students talking about killing one another. Over the years the game has become more complicated with more and more rules - there are judges, the game can't be played on school property. Michael and his team are in the finals and the two teams decide on one last shoot out at midnight at an agreed upon location. Michael is prepared to win, dressed all in black with a face mask and his neon water gun covered in black duct tape. When a police officer tells him to "drop his weapon" he figures it's someone on the opposite team trying to trick him. He raises his gun to shoot, is shot by the police officer and dies.

Characters

MICHAEL: Male. The curator of the play.

JENNIFER: Any Gender. Reporter for WCYA.

JASON: Any Gender. A none-too-bright member of Michael's Assassin team.

GIRL: Female. A single-line character squirted by Jason.

MELISSA: Any Gender. Principal of Ratherford High School.

MR. HUDNOR: Any Gender. Argumentation teacher at Ratherford High School.

CAPTAIN MEEKS: Any Gender. Chief of the Ratherford Police Department.

TOMMY: Male. Cocky member of an Assassin Team opposing Michael's.

JAKE: Male. Teammate with Tommy.

VARIOUS PROTESTORS: 8-20 people carrying signs and chanting protests.

ELISE: Female. An Assassin judge with a crush on Michael.

OFFICER KLINE: Female. A member of the Ratherford police force.

QUESTIONER: Any Gender. A faceless voice who questions Officer Kline.

MRS. GRAY: Female. An old widow who feels threatened by the Assassin game.

COMPLAINT 1-9: Representing players of the Assassin game with complaints for the judges.

CARA: Any Gender. An Assassin player on a team opposing Michael's.

TOBY: Any Gender. Teammate to Cara.

MORGAN: Female. Member of the final-round Assassin team.

BRIGID: Female. Captain of the final-round Assassin team.

SHELLY: Female. Member of the final-round Assassin team.

ANNA: Female. Member of the final-round Assassin team.

Themes

Assumptions, Choice, Power

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What do you believe in? How do you demonstrate your beliefs?

- ★ Do you like to argue? Why or why not?
- ★ What makes a good argument?
- ★ Do you make assumptions about people or situations?
- ★ Have you ever made a wrong assumption about someone?
- ★ What assumptions have been made about you?
- ★ Reflect on this quote: “We judge others by their actions, ourselves by our intentions.”
- ★ Are squirt gun competitions harmless?
- ★ Do you believe what’s fun for the young is annoying for the old?
- ★ What assumptions do you have about adults?
- ★ If you were a judge, in a game of Assassin, how would you use your power?

Pre-Read Activities

Opinion Poll

- ★ An assumption is a thing that is accepted as true without question or proof.
- ★ Ask students to share their opinion by standing to indicate that they agree with a specific assumption. State the assumptions and then repeat them so students can stand.
- ★ Assumptions can be controversial. If you want to make more general assumptions, or more direct and pointed assumptions, feel free to change them. For the latter, make sure to assign time for a post-activity debrief as students see how their classmates feel.
- ★ State the assumption and then say: Agree? Pause to give those students who agree the chance to stand, hold for two seconds and then sit. Do the same for “Disagree.”

★ Possible Options:

- » Pineapple on pizza is wrong.
- » People who don't pay attention to what they wear are lazy.
- » People never change.
- » Stay at home moms are better moms.
- » Homelessness is a choice.

Research Project

- ★ Divide students into groups and have them research the squirt gun game Assassins. What are the official rules? How is it played? When did it start? What controversies surround the game?
- ★ After completing their research students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Group Debate

- ★ Divide students into groups. Groups will debate on the question: *Is the squirt gun game Assassin safe to play?*
- ★ Each group is given a position, either **for** playing the game Assassin, or **against** playing the game.
- ★ Give groups time to prepare the arguments for their side.
- ★ The format of the debate:
 - » The **for** side is given two minutes to present their argument.

- » The **against** side is given two minutes.
- » Each group is given three minutes to prepare a rebuttal (responding to what the other side has said).
- » The **against** side goes first for two minutes.
- » Lastly, the **for** side goes for two minutes.
- ★ For this exercise, have all the group pairs go at once, rather than each presenting to the class. Monitor and observe to make sure everyone is staying on track.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the activity. Did anyone change their mind through the process?

Assumption Collage

- ★ Create a collage that visualizes the assumptions that have been made about you.
 - » Brainstorm the images, symbols, and words that represent the assumptions.
 - » Decide what materials you will use to visualize the assumptions.
 - » After you create your collage, write a one-paragraph description of the choices you made and why.

Assumption Scene: Teen

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss and decide upon an assumption that is made about teenagers.
- ★ Groups will create a one-minute scene about the assumption and present. Everyone in the group must be part of the scene in some way.
- ★ Discuss the assumptions afterward. How does it feel to have someone make a decision about you without question or proof?

Assumption Scene: Adult

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss and decide upon an assumption they have about adults.
- ★ Groups will create a one-minute scene about the assumption and present. Everyone in the group must be part of the scene in some way.
- ★ Discuss the assumptions afterward. Why do they have this assumption? Why do they think it's true?

Wrong Assumptions Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will discuss situations in which they've made a wrong assumption.
 - » Alternatively, you could have a class discussion about general wrong assumptions and create a list of situations. Then in their groups, students can pick one from the list.
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau series:
 - » The first picture is a visual of the wrong assumption about a person.
 - » The second picture is the reaction of the person.
 - » The third picture is the result. How do the rest react to learning they are wrong? Do they double down on their assumption or change?
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.
- ★ Discuss afterward: What did students see? What were the assumptions being made?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Water. Gun. Argument.* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What is the Principal's name?
3. Who teaches the argumentation class?
4. Why do Tommy and Jake think they will win?
5. When did Officer Kline join the police force?
6. Who yells "boo" at Mrs. Gray?
7. Why does Elise say that Michael is still in the game?
8. Who duct-tapes their gun?
9. What's the name of the scholarship?
10. What happens to Officer Kline?

11. At the end of the play, where is Michael?
12. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the title *Water. Gun. Argument.* instead of *Water Gun Argument*? What is the playwright trying to say with the punctuation?
2. In your opinion, why does the playwright identify this play as docu-theatre?
3. What is a curator? Why does the playwright identify Michael as the curator of the play?
4. How is a curator different from a narrator?
5. Why does the playwright include this quote in the play: "We judge others by their actions, ourselves by our intentions"? Cite the text to support your answer.
6. In your opinion, why does the playwright not share what the protestors are protesting when we first meet them? How does this affect the storytelling?
7. What is the significance of this line: "Assassin is basically a joke"?
8. What is the significance of this line: "An argument is a lie you choose to believe and defend"?
9. Analyze Michael's use of language. What kind of words does he use? What can you infer about his character based on his vocabulary and word choice?
10. How would you costume Michael? Use the text to support your answer.
11. Based on the way Elise speaks, how would you visualize her? What is her physicality?
12. How is the ensemble used in the play? How is this use theatrical?
13. The play takes place on a bare stage. In your opinion, why did the playwright make this choice?

14. What is the tone of the play? Cite the text to support your answer.

15. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Water. Gun. Argument.*?
2. In your opinion, why does the playwright present this topic in the framework of an argument?
3. What is the playwright trying to say about assumptions? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. In your opinion, why does the playwright present the story from Michael's point of view?
5. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with assumptions with what happens in the play.
6. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Are squirt gun competitions harmless?
- ★ Why is Michael telling this story?
- ★ Which of the arguments at the end of the play do you agree with? Why?
- ★ Do you agree or disagree with Michael's point at the end of the play: "An argument is a lie you choose to believe and defend"?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design Description

- ★ There is no specific set design for this play. Have students write a description of their set vision, or draw a colour rendering. How would you visualize the themes of the play?

Light Design Description

- ★ There is no specific lighting design for this play. Have students write a description of their lighting vision. What colours would they use? How would you use light to visualize the themes of the play?

Sound Design Description

- ★ There is no specific sound design for this play. Have students write a description of their sound vision. What type of music fits the play? What sounds would you use to create an appropriate mood and atmosphere?

Sound Design Character

- ★ Have students create a playlist of songs that they think illustrates Michael's personality. What music would he listen to and why? What type of sounds fit his character? Try the same exercise for Elise, Tommy and Mrs. Gray.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.

- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Playwright Process

Playwright Alan Haehnel talks about his process writing *Water. Gun. Argument*. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

Why did you choose this topic to write about?

I've long been fascinated by the tension between what people believe and what they do. Often, what they state as a belief runs counter to their actions. As I've seen the game of Assassin become more popular over the years at the high school where I teach, I've found it a great demonstration of just this phenomenon—espousing a philosophy yet acting counter to it. The students at my high school are generally anti-violence, anti-guns, pro-peace. Yet, even though school shootings have become more and more prevalent, they insist that playing Assassin is not only harmless, but their right.

What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

The play started for me with the death of Michael. Though I have not yet encountered a report of anyone actually dying as a result of the Assassin game (fortunately), I thought that such a terrible, ironic happening would really bring the conflict of philosophy versus behavior into strong focus.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

This is quite a cerebral play. Keeping it theatrically interesting—with a good mix of humor, character development, tension and overall strong acting opportunities—became the major challenge. A good debate is fun for me but doesn't often make for compelling drama.

Did you cut anything that you wish could have stayed in the final product?

Actually, for this show, Theatrefolk was kind enough to have me work with a dramaturg, which was a first for me. After consulting with him, listening to his observations, I found myself cutting things I had originally thought worked well. Ultimately, though, the cuttings and changes strengthened the work, so I don't regret the edits. I did have what I thought was a clever, intentionally-bad song just after Michael's death—some blatant comic relief. The tone shift was too jarring, though, and it had to go. I wouldn't be surprised to see the song, or some variation of it, show up in another play sometime.

As a playwright, what is your favourite moment in the play?

As a playwright, I love the moments of tension before Michael gets shot. As Michael and Officer Kline narrate the same scene from their different perspectives, the audience will have that sensation of suspecting what is coming but hoping they are wrong.