

Cutting a Scene: *A Tale of Two Cities*, Chapter Two

WHAT'S ON AND WHY

Cutting a scene is 1 of the 9 Folger essential practices. When students are asked to cut (omit, scratch out) lines from any text, they must do all kinds of close reading in order to make their decisions about what stays and what goes. Because the act of cutting a scene is just a means of “sneaky close reading,” it’s important especially for you, the teacher, to remember that the process matters way more than the product.

Students need to read the scene out loud and put the words in their own mouths... they need to arrive at their own understanding of what is happening in the most basic sense... they need to identify words or lines that confuse them and make meaning from them....they need to deepen and refine their understanding of what is happening as well as their understanding of what every line says... and they need to think about how the passage works, as a whole and at the level of each line. They need to work with at least one partner to debate these points and reach consensus. And of course—they need to evaluate Dickens’ writing and edit it themselves. Talk about power!

This should be the students’ first encounter with this scene, at least in your class. However, we recommend doing this lesson after students have already done some “on your feet” work with words and lines and revisiting it throughout the unit. The arc of the Folger Method builds from individual words and lines to longer texts, like speeches and scenes. Cutting a text is a low-prep, high-impact way of teaching close reading! All along the way, students are experimenting with and owning the language.

By having students cut an early scene of *A Tale of Two Cities*, students are examining the language Dickens uses to create a mystery and establish the setting and the characters’ relationships with each other all on their own. No need for a lecture or a lengthy explanation! With cutting a text there are all kinds of possibilities for students to explore. Step back and see what your students make of it.

TEXTS

A Tale of Two Cities, Chapter 2: “The Dover Mail” by Charles Dickens

WHAT TO DO

This lesson involves two main components: cutting the scene and performing the cut performances. If you don’t have time for the performances, you can have students cut the scene and then simply discuss their choices afterwards. However, if you can spare the time,

the performances really deepen students' understanding of the text and the possibilities of interpretation.

Don't overcomplicate the lesson. Give intentionally simple instructions and then step to the side. Trust the process.

1. Tell students that cutting the script is a reality that directors face when directing a Dickens' movie adaptation or any play. There's nothing sacred about Dickens. Edit away!
2. Explain that their job is to cut the scene in half: to shorten the scene without losing what is most important in the scene. *What is most important is up to them.*
3. **It is absolutely essential NOT to tell students to do anything more than cut the number of lines in half.** And don't split hairs. This scene, in which students are introduced to Jarvis Lorry and Jerry Cruncher in a mysterious way is 1,350 words and 97 lines. Tell them to cut the scene in half—675 words or 48 lines. Imagine they have to tell the story of this scene in just a few short minutes. They need to come to a consensus in each group about what to cut.
4. Tell students that they have to understand the gist of a line before they cut it.
5. **Ask students to work with 2-3 partners on the following steps.**
 - Groups of 3-4 students read the scene, as a group, out loud. Students may assign parts or read around the group, changing readers when the speaker changes. They must read out loud.
 - Each group determines which lines to cut and keep so that their scene ends up around 50 lines. Each student has a script, and all the scripts end up having the same cuts.
 - Each student should have a script so that if asked to perform the scene (hint, hint!), their group could perform a unified cutting of the scene.
6. Remember: what matters way more than the final number of lines or the final cut scene is the learning process of getting there.
7. Provide no further instructions and get out of the way.
8. From time to time, walk around the room to hear the close reading and consensus-building going on! Get ready for some surprises—some groups might think that lines that establish the setting are more important than keeping the plot intact, and that's totally fine. Others might want to save the lines that are the most poetic or musical. That's fine, too. Let everyone come to their own decisions.
9. Don't worry if students do not finish; this activity is about the process.
10. On the back of their scripts or in their notebooks, ask each student to write an individual reflection: What is the most important line they saved? What makes this line so important to your scene? What is the most useless line they cut? Why was it useless in this scene? Did they have any other reasons for cutting the lines they did? Get students defending specific choices in this informal reflection but save any class discussion until all the groups have performed their scenes!

11. Now, ask students to get together in their groups to prepare performances of their cut scenes. Every group will share their shortened scene.
 12. Tell groups they don't have to know the slightest thing about acting. All they have to do is try to tell the story of their cut scene with their voices, bodies, movements, and imaginations. They act out the words for the audience.
 13. You know the length of your class period. Make sure you save enough time for all the groups to perform their scenes. If not all, then at least 3. But ideally all groups will perform! It's important to get every student speaking Dickens on the regular.
 14. After rehearsal time, invite class performances. As students watch their peers perform, they can jot down anything they notice or wonder.
 15. After performances, invite constructive observations from students. Ask students to compare and contrast what they saw and heard, to comment on the variety of text-based choices. Note that all the different choices are good as long as they make textual sense.
 16. Wrap up with this think-pair-share:
 - What's going on with this scene?
 - What big questions is this scene asking?
 - How did it feel to cut Dickens' lines? What were some of the challenges?
 - How did it feel to perform Dickens' lines? What were some of the challenges?
 - Were there any words or lines that really stood out?
 - Were there any images that repeated or really stood out?
 - What did you learn (about yourself, about this text, about the world) through this process of making the text your own?
 17. Celebrate the fact that students made meaning from this scene without any internet explanation or teacher translation—and that they faced the difficult language with courage. Once students realize that they can tackle the real thing on their own, sparks fly!
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HOW DID IT GO?

- Did every student play a role in cutting and performing Dickens' language?
- Were students citing the text as they made their editorial decisions?
- Did you, the teacher, resist defining or explaining words? Did you ask questions instead of providing answers? Did you step back and let students own the experience and the language?
- Did students feel empowered to speak up and bring their unique voices, knowledge, and perspectives to the text they encountered today?
- Have students realized the impressive thing they just did: make meaning from Dickens' original language without any teacher explanation?
- Did students notice that embodying Dickens' language helps them comprehend and interpret it?

If yes, then it's all good!

HANDOUT: CUTTING A SCENE *A Tale of Two Cities* Chapter Two

Two other passengers, besides the one, were plodding up the hill by the side of the mail. All three were wrapped to the cheekbones and over the ears, and wore jack-boots. Not one of the three could have said, from anything he saw, what either of the other two was like; and each was hidden under almost as many wrappers from the eyes of the mind, as from the eyes of the body, of his two companions. In those days, travellers were very shy of being confidential on a short notice, for anybody on the road might be a robber or in league with robbers. As to the latter, when every posting-house and ale-house could produce somebody in 'the Captain's' pay, ranging from the landlord to the lowest stable non-descript, it was the likeliest thing upon the cards. So the guard of the Dover mail thought to himself, Free eBooks at Planet eBook.com that Friday night in November, one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five, lumbering up Shooter's Hill, as he stood on his own particular perch behind the mail, beating his feet, and keeping an eye and a hand on the arm-chest before him, where a loaded blunderbuss lay at the top of six or eight loaded horse-pistols, deposited on a substratum of cutlass.

The Dover mail was in its usual genial position that the guard suspected the passengers, the passengers suspected one another and the guard, they all suspected everybody else, and the coachman was sure of nothing but the horses; as to which cattle he could with a clear conscience have taken his oath on the two Testaments that they were not fit for the journey.

'Wo-ho!' said the coachman. 'So, then! One more pull and you're at the top and be damned to you, for I have had trouble enough to get you to it!—Joe!'

'Halloa!' the guard replied.

'What o'clock do you make it, Joe?'

'Ten minutes, good, past eleven.'

'My blood!' ejaculated the vexed coachman, 'and not atop of Shooter's yet! Tst! Yah! Get on with you!'

The emphatic horse, cut short by the whip in a most decided negative, made a decided scramble for it, and the three other horses followed suit. Once more, the Dover mail struggled on, with the jack-boots of its passengers squashing along by its side. They had stopped when the coach stopped, and they kept close company with it. If any one of the three had had the hardihood to propose to another to walk on a little ahead into the mist and darkness, he would have put himself in a fair way of getting shot instantly as a highwayman.

The last burst carried the mail to the summit of the hill. The horses stopped to breathe again, and the guard got down to skid the wheel for the descent, and open the coachdoor to let the passengers in.

'Tst! Joe!' cried the coachman in a warning voice, looking down from his box.

'What do you say, Tom?'

They both listened.

'I say a horse at a canter coming up, Joe.'

'I say a horse at a gallop, Tom,' returned the guard, leaving his hold of the door, and mounting nimbly to his place.

'Gentlemen! In the king's name, all of you!'

With this hurried adjuration, he cocked his blunderbuss, and stood on the offensive.

The passenger booked by this history, was on the coachstep, getting in; the two other passengers were close behind him, and about to follow. He remained on the step, half in the coach and half out of; they re-mained in the road below him. They all looked from the coachman to the guard, and from the guard to the coachman, and listened. The coachman looked back and the guard looked back, and even the emphatic leader pricked up his ears and looked back, without contradicting.

The stillness consequent on the cessation of the rumbling and labouring of the coach, added to the stillness of the night, made it very quiet indeed. The panting of the horses communicated a tremulous motion to the coach, as if it were in a state of agitation. The hearts of the passengers beat loud enough perhaps to be heard; but at any rate, the quiet pause was audibly expressive of people out of breath, and holding the breath, and having the pulses quickened by expectation.

The sound of a horse at a gallop came fast and furiously up the hill.

'So-ho!' the guard sang out, as loud as he could roar.

'Yo there! Stand! I shall fire!'

The pace was suddenly checked, and, with much splashing and floundering, a man's voice called from the mist, 'Is that the Dover mail?' 'Never you mind what it is!' the guard retorted. 'What are you?' 'IS that the Dover mail?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'I want a passenger, if it is.'

'What passenger?'

'Mr. Jarvis Lorry.'

Our booked passenger showed in a moment that it was his name. The guard, the coachman, and the two other passengers eyed him distrustfully.

'Keep where you are,' the guard called to the voice in the mist, 'because, if I should make a mistake, it could never be set right in your lifetime. Gentleman of the name of Lorry answer straight.'

'What is the matter?' asked the passenger, then, with mildly quavering speech. 'Who wants me? Is it Jerry?' ('I don't like Jerry's voice, if it is Jerry,' growled the guard to himself. 'He's hoarser than suits me, is Jerry.')

'Yes, Mr. Lorry.'

'What is the matter?'

'A despatch sent after you from over yonder. T. and Co.'

'I know this messenger, guard,' said Mr. Lorry, getting down into the road—assisted from behind more swiftly than politely by the other two passengers, who immediately scrambled into the coach, shut the door, and pulled up the window. 'He may come close; there's nothing wrong.'

'I hope there ain't, but I can't make so 'Nation sure of that,' said the guard, in gruff soliloquy.

'Hallo you!'

'Well! And hallo you!' said Jerry, more hoarsely than before.

'Come on at a footpace! d'ye mind me? And if you've got holsters to that saddle o' yours, don't let me see your hand go nigh 'em. For I'm a devil at a quick mistake, and when I make one it takes the form of Lead. So now let's look at you.'

The figures of a horse and rider came slowly through the eddying mist, and came to the side of the mail, where the passenger stood. The rider stooped, and, casting up his eyes at the guard, handed the passenger a small folded paper. The rider's horse was blown, and both horse and rider were covered with mud, from the hoofs of the horse to the hat of the man.

'Guard!' said the passenger, in a tone of quiet business confidence. The watchful guard, with his right hand at the stock of his raised blunderbuss, his left at the barrel, and his eye on the horseman, answered curtly, 'Sir.'

'There is nothing to apprehend. I belong to Tellson's Bank. You must know Tellson's Bank in London. I am going to Paris on business. A crown to drink. I may read this?'

'If so be as you're quick, sir.'

He opened it in the light of the coach-lamp on that side, and read—first to himself and then aloud: 'Wait at Dover for Mam'selle.' It's not long, you see, guard. Jerry, say that my answer was, RECALLED TO LIFE.'

Jerry started in his saddle. 'That's a Blazing strange answer, too,' said he, at his hoarsest.

'Take that message back, and they will know that I received this, as well as if I wrote. Make the best of your way. Good night.' With those words the passenger opened the coach-door and got in; not at all assisted by his fellow-passengers, who had expeditiously secreted their watches and purses in their boots, and were now making a general pretence of being asleep. With no more definite purpose than to escape the hazard of originating any other kind of action.