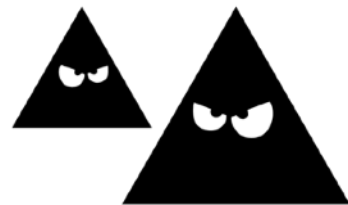




A story-based approach to video

ANGRY TRIANGLES



About this activity

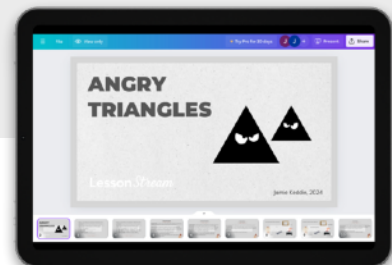
A classic psychology experiment from 1944, simplified for the classroom.

- ▶ **Language level:** B1 upwards (A2 if you don't include the reading)
- ▶ **Age of learner:** Teenagers and adults
- ▶ **Duration of activity:** 60 minutes
- ▶ **Activities:** Writing, speaking and reading
- ▶ **Topics:** Psychology and storytelling
- ▶ **Aims:** To explore the human instinct for creating stories

What you will need:

- A short animation from 1944, which was created as part of a classic psychology experiment.
- A copy of the handout on page 5 (one for each student).

There is also a Canva slideshow to support this activity.



The experiment

This activity is a simple recreation of a classic experiment by psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, titled “An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior”, which concluded that human beings have a natural instinct for creating narratives to make sense of abstract or ambiguous situations or stimuli.

Activity outline

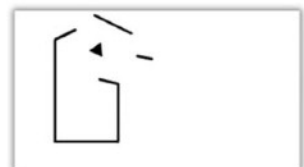
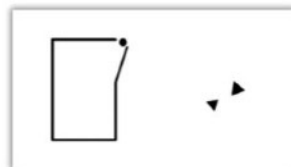
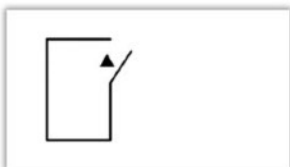
1. Give students the following instruction:

“ I am going to show you a short video from 1944.
This is in the days before YouTube and TikTok so please don't get too excited, OK?
The video is only about a minute long and you are going to see it twice.
After that, I want you to write down what happened in the video.
Any questions?

2. Play the video twice and then ask students to write down what happened.

Tips:

- Students' texts do not have to be too long. Between 40 and 80 words is usually sufficient for the task.
- For students with a lower level of English, it might be tempting to prepare them by providing useful words and phrases for the writing (e.g. *have an argument, have a fight, aggressive, to get stuck in the house*). However, doing so could influence their responses and defeat the purpose of the experiment. Instead, I suggest providing students with bilingual dictionaries so they can express their own individual ideas.
- Negotiate a time limit for the writing. For lower-level students using dictionaries, this time limit will likely need to be longer than for higher-level students.
- Although the video is quite short, the narrative becomes slightly more complex in the second half. For lower-level students, you could choose to play only the first 30 seconds of the video (ending just after the “fight”).



In the original experiment, as in this activity, subjects were shown the video twice and then given the specific instruction “Write down what happened in the video”.



Scan or click the code
to see the video



3. Once students have finished the writing, put them into pairs. Then ask them to read out their texts and compare what they wrote.

4. Invite two or three students to read out their texts to the rest of the class. Then ask the following questions:

“ So, what about everyone else?
 What sort of text did you write?
 Did the shapes become characters?
 Or were they just shapes?
 Did you write some sort of story?

5. Now ask students to get into groups of three or four. Ask students to compare their texts and do the following:

- Find three details that your texts/stories have in common (e.g. *We all decided that the rectangle is a house*).
- Find three details that make your texts/stories different (e.g. *I decided that the circle is a little boy, he decided that it's a dog and she decided that it's a football*).

6. Go around the class and invite the groups to describe similarities and differences between their texts. Give language feedback when appropriate.

7. Tell students:

“ We have just done a famous experiment.
 It's a psychology experiment from 1944.
 Did anyone guess that's what we were doing?
 What do you think the experiment shows – in other words, what can we learn from it?

8. Ask students to discuss this in the groups and then listen to their ideas.

9. Give out copies of the handout on page 5 that explains the theory behind the experiment. Ask students to read the text and discuss the question at the end, in their groups.

Tips:

- The questions in the handout may be quite difficult. Give students some examples to get them started (see the “Teacher’s notes” on the next page).
- The text in the worksheet is tailored for B1 students who might need help with the following words: *personalities, emotions, to chase, aggressive, violent, instinct, narratives, abstract, uncertain, inanimate, interaction*.

10. Let students share their answers to the questions on the handout with the whole class. Listen and give feedback. When appropriate, offer suggestions of your own (see the “Teacher’s notes” on the next page for ideas).

Teacher's notes

According to the experiment, humans have a natural instinct for storytelling. We create stories to make sense of abstract or uncertain situations.

i. Can you think of a situation when we might do this?

- Throughout history, humans have invented stories to explain natural events, like the Chinese myth that a dragon swallows the sun during a solar eclipse.
- We give meaning to coincidences and serendipitous events, often believing that everything happens for a reason.
- By speculating, we create stories to fill gaps in our knowledge, such as employees imagining what's going on behind the closed door of a management meeting.



ii. Can you think of a situation when this instinct could be an advantage?

- We create stories to comfort ourselves or find meaning in tragedy.
- Creating narratives helps us to make sense of complex situations, reducing confusion and aiding decision-making.
- Imagining others' experiences fosters empathy and connection.

iii. Can you think of a situation when this instinct could create problems?

- We might imagine stories about people we don't know, leading to bias, stereotypes and discrimination.
- Our narratives may be based on incomplete or inaccurate information, leading to misunderstandings, misjudgements and biased interpretations of events.
- The narratives we create and hold onto can lead to conflict and even war.

Variation

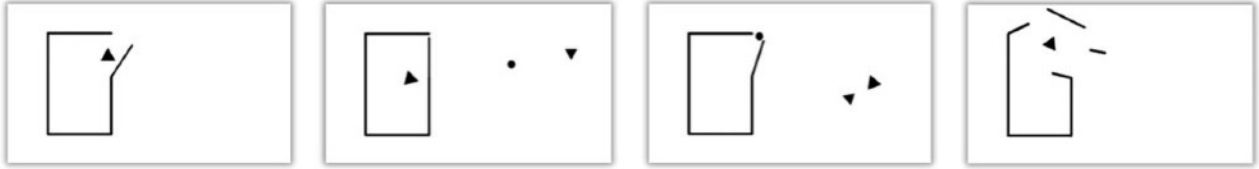
In the original experiment, when the researchers discovered that people tend to anthropomorphise the shapes and create stories about them, they repeated the experiment. This time, however, they changed the task. Subjects were asked to watch the video and answer several questions, which included the following:

- What kind of person is the big triangle?
- What kind of person is the small triangle?
- What kind of person is the circle?
- Why did the two triangles fight?
- Why did the circle go into the house?
- Why did the big triangle break up the house?



This offers an alternative way to do things and might be more suitable for students with a lower level of English.

“An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior”



In 1944, Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel carried out a famous experiment. They created a short film with some simple moving shapes: a big triangle, a small triangle, a circle and a rectangle. The shapes moved around a screen in various ways.

They showed the short film to 35 people and asked them to write down what happened.

Most people did not just describe the shapes and their movements. Instead, they created stories, giving the shapes human-like personalities and emotions. For example, most people said that:

- The rectangle was a house.
- The small triangle and the circle were together in some way – as friends or partners, for example.
- The two triangles had a fight.
- The big triangle chased the small triangle and the circle.
- The big triangle was aggressive and violent.

The experiment shows that humans have a natural instinct for storytelling. We create stories to make sense of abstract or uncertain situations.

We also see inanimate objects as if they are characters in those stories, especially when the objects' movements suggest interaction.



Questions

According to the experiment, humans have a natural instinct for storytelling. We create stories to make sense of abstract or uncertain situations.

- Can you think of a situation when we might do this?
- Can you think of a situation when this instinct could be an advantage?
- Can you think of a situation in which this instinct could create problems?