

# Stinky

**The puppet for  
lazy  
average  
wannabe  
puppeteers**



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**<http://stinkypuppet.net>**



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# Introduction

This document describes a puppet act format that is effective and simple while requiring little equipment, people, and specialist skills. It's designed to help people with no puppet experience to get into it. You only need one puppet, one puppeteer, one leader, and no stage (just a 240 litre wheelie bin!).

Stinky Pong the Smelly Puppet is a cheeky, easily-confused, and yet curious puppet who lives in a wheelie bin. A friend of Stinky's will typically wheel him in his bin into a children's class, where the children knock on the bin and Stinky will come out, typically with some kind of crisis or dilemma. Stinky's problem typically leads Stinky to wonder about an aspect of God, and with the help of the leader and the children, the answer to Stinky's question will be answered from the Bible. His crisis is usually resolved to boot!



Photo: Anne McIntosh

## Audience and Purpose

I'm aiming this mainly at people like me: you want to serve children better, you're not a particularly brilliant actor or puppeteer, but are willing to give it a go and want a simple act you can do and a detailed description of how to do it.

I don't cover puppet technique here, because it's covered really well elsewhere (see Puppet Resources section), and I think I'm a pretty average puppeteer anyway!

## Backstory

I was a Sunday School teacher when I was younger, and I've often felt convicted that I could have done a better job. I don't think I put enough effort into communicating the gospel in a way that would be helpful for children. Instead, I often ended up with a mini Bible study: abstract discussion around the table about a passage. The passage of Jesus' fury towards the disciples when they stop children from coming to Jesus (Mark 10:13-16) has often challenged me, particularly when I reflect on who this angry man really is (Revelation 1:9-18). I want to please my Lord Jesus by teaching children the gospel *well*, in a way that helps them understand, remember, and obey.

The idea of using a wheelie bin is not mine; I saw someone<sup>1</sup> do it at a previous church, and thought it was very clever and effective. Later, I was involved in a children's camp that had puppets and once again saw how effective (and fun!) puppets were with children, and I was sold. I started thinking of how I could do some basic puppetry at church. I had never done it before, and I don't consider myself an 'arty' or 'drama' person. Actually, the idea of doing drama performances would make me very nervous.

I looked for a resource to tell me in detail how to do a basic and generic puppet act that would work at my church, and couldn't find one. I found some helpful resources, particularly on general technique, but many had an approach that wasn't feasible for me, because they typically:

- covered *making* puppets, which I didn't feel confident doing, nor did I have the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhett Harris performed at St Paul's Anglican, Carlingford, Sydney. Rhett, in turn, got the idea from Paul Dudley.

- involved *multiple puppets* (often two). I was thinking of a single puppet and a single leader talking to the puppet, to make it practical in smaller churches.
- required the production of *props and costumes*, which I wouldn't have the skill nor time for.
- required building or buying a *puppet stage*. I was particularly reluctant to do this at the start, as it seemed a big investment of time and money and I wasn't sure how involved I would get into puppets.
- Many scripts required specific puppet characters that would only be useful for a few scripts. I wanted to get one 'generic' puppet (and no more!) that I could use for many scripts.

After some thinking, I managed to borrow a bin from church and a puppet from friends, and gave it a go. I'm sure it was a poor performance 'technically', but the kids got into it. Since then I've had lots of fun doing a few other acts, and I've developed a generic script format that I find helpful. One of the pleasant surprises has been I don't get very nervous before performances, I suppose because I'm hidden away from the audience.

More than ten years since I started, and with over 50 scripts under my belt, I've produced this guide and site to help others get into puppets, so they can teach children the gospel.

## Why puppets

Puppets are a great pedagogical tool. A puppet is simply an inanimate object that is *animated* (brought to life!) by a puppeteer through movement and sound. They have many great features:

- Children simply love them (and adults don't mind them either!).
- They draw (and hold) attention. We've done acts holding the attention of about 100 children for about 20 minutes – quite an achievement!
- They turn a monologue into a dialogue, which is *much* easier to listen to.
- Puppets can say and do things others are not allowed to. They can introduce a funny/cheeky element into a lesson without undermining the teacher's role.
- Puppets are a perfect 'proxy student'. They can be made to ask the questions you wish students asked but may be too afraid to ask. Children can easily identify with the puppet and will 'take in' an answer to its question.

## Why Stinky

I think Stinky could be a helpful puppet act to start out with because it is effective yet simple, requiring only one puppet (that can be used for all scripts), one puppeteer, and one leader/helper (who can easily be a different person each lesson). No stage is required (just the bin!), which avoids a lot of setting up and packing up. It would be particularly helpful for a small(ish) church with only 2-3 children's leaders, to be done as 'children's spots' during the service or as part of the children's program on a semi-regular basis.

Naturally, many people will really get into puppets and will want to go beyond this type of act – go for it! My main hope, however, is to create a *very simple* way to get started, and thus have more churches making use of puppets.

## Act structure

I've developed a simple structure to the Stinky act that gives me a skeleton to flesh out when script-writing, and which I've found works well with the children. Further, I suspect the children enjoy the sense of mastery they gain as they become familiar with the structure. This gives them more confidence to participate and helps them focus on what is being taught rather than on working out

‘what is going on’. I’ve included an **annotated script** in the website, which you can use as an example to work through as you read this section. The structure is as follows:

1. **Briefing:** The leader briefs the children and explains the introduction routine before he comes on stage, including practicing shouting ‘Come out Stinky!’. This is also a good time to rearrange the children so they are well positioned in relation to where the bin will be placed.
2. **Introduction:** Stinky's bin gets wheeled in, and a child volunteer is picked to knock on the bin and then sits down again. Stinky responds 'Who is it?', and the kids call out 'Come out Stinky!'. Stinky typically responds 'I can't hear you, who is it?', and the children call out louder. The leader then opens the lid, and Stinky comes out and says 'Hello little monkeys!' to the kids, and the kids respond 'Hello Stinky!'.
3. **Situation:** Stinky has a little dilemma or situation to deal with, and the leader with the kids help him out. The situation will reflect the lesson of the day. This is the ideal place for comedy, where Stinky (and not the leader) plays the goofy and confused character who needs help. This is also an opportunity for a visual anchoring element to the act, which becomes a ‘vessel’ that gets filled with the lesson’s content. This will hopefully carry the Bible Bite in the child’s mind for many years!
4. **Lesson:** Once the situation is resolved, Stinky will segway into God, often by asking a question about God or the Bible. The leader then asks the children for their thoughts on the question, and then suggests they find out what the Bible says about the matter. A Bible verse is read out from the computer by a child, and the leader explains and develops it.
5. **Bible Bite:** This is a simple sentence that summarises the lesson for the day, and children are encouraged to remember it. It's repeated (ideally) three times to help them remember it: a child is asked to read it, then Stinky is asked to say it but often gets it comically wrong, and then the whole group is asked to help him by saying it together.
6. **Wrap up:** Stinky says he has to go, thanks the leader for teaching him about God (another chance to repeat the Bible Bite), and says goodbye to the kids, and kids respond. The leader or helper closes the lid and wheels the lid out.

## Basic Instructions

### Puppet character

It’s very important to develop your puppet’s character and personality, and stay consistent. In my acts, Stinky is cheeky, playful, a bit clumsy and not particularly bright (he needs lots of help from the kids!). You’re naturally welcome to change this, but this is the Stinky that you’ll find in my scripts.

The puppet’s voice is also important. I started thinking I had to create a voice very different from my own so as not to be ‘discovered’, but now feel the visual nature of the puppet easily compensates for this and it’s much more important to be able to speak with the puppet’s voice *consistently*. For example, I tried a high-pitched voice but found it hard to maintain the same pitch throughout, so my Stinky character now has an exaggerated Spanish accent.

### Getting a puppet

I think it’s certainly worth paying extra to get a ‘professional’ grade puppet. For example, the one I got has elastics where your fingers go, which help you control the mouth much better. I bought a ‘hand’ as well, which is very handy with props.



## Finding a bin

You'll need a 240 litre 'wheelie bin', commonly used in Australia. You could just borrow one that has been thoroughly cleaned – perhaps one that has been used for recycling. Alternatively, hardware shops such as Bunnings sell them for about AUD \$100.

## In the bin

It's tight, but it's not too bad. You need to squat diagonally, with the elbow of your 'puppet' arm closest to the front of the bin. I often rest my elbow against the front wall of the bin. For example, I'm left handed, so I squat diagonally with my left shoulder closest to the front of the bin. I find I start getting a 'dead leg' after about 15-20 minutes, which is a wonderful incentive to keep scripts brief and to the point!

Getting in and out safely takes a bit of practice. To get in, I place the bin next to a table and get someone to hold the bin while I jump in. Once in, I then put on my puppet. To get out, I first take off the puppet and any other props and once again get someone to hold the bin still while I push on the top sides of the bin to get out, and step onto a chair or table. It might be helpful to find an object that you could put inside the bin while you're in it that you can step on.

I usually stick the script to the inside wall of the bin for easy reading.

You'll need someone to wheel the bin into the stage and out. It may be best if it's someone other than the leader so children are not left unattended – but this will depend on your setting and context. They need to place the bin with its front (the side opposite the lid's hinge) facing the audience. The leader should stand on the side of the bin which the puppeteer is oriented towards. For example, because I'm left-handed I squat diagonally facing towards the right (so my left hand with the puppet is closer to the front of the bin), so the leader stands to my right. The leader also needs to stand close enough to the bin so the puppeteer can make eye contact with them and can see where the leader is looking at. The leader is the puppeteer's eyes! When you're in the bin, you can't see what's going on, so you use the leader's eyes to orient the puppet, particularly when there is an exchange with an audience member. (During an act at a school where we had used microphones and an amplifier, I turned Stinky towards behind the bin because that's where I heard the voice of one of the leaders coming from, but it turned the leader was to the side of the stage and it was just the amplifier that Stinky talked to!) It's also helpful for the leader to see inside the bin. The puppeteer can communicate by looks and facial expressions, and the leader can see if there are problems (e.g. a fall script or a missing prop). However, the leader needs to remember to look at Stinky's eyes while talking, not the puppeteer's!

## Tips for the leader

- Explain the intro routine to the kids before wheeling Stinky in.
- It's best to have a third helper wheel the bin in so you can keep the children's focus.
- Remember that Stinky is the natural focus of children's attention, not you.
- When the bin is wheeled in, place it about 2 metres from the closest child, with the front of the bin facing straight to the children (i.e. the hinge of the bin's lid should be furthest from the children). It's important that you place the bin in this way so the puppeteer knows where the children are and they can face Stinky in the right direction.
- Stand near to the bin so puppeteer can see you – you're their eyes! Ensure also that you can have eye contact with the puppeteer, so you have a way to communicate during the act. However, remember to look at Stinky's eyes while you're talking to him – not the puppeteer's!
- If a child starts approaching to 'look inside the bin', you can simply shut down the lid until the child sits down again.
- I generally write the script so that Stinky drives the dialogue, since I've got the script stuck on the inside wall of the bin. That puts less pressure on the leader to memorise long scripts. However,

it's helpful if you read through it and get an idea of what will happen. Have a printout on hand just in case you need it.

## Microphone and sound

The best option is to use a wireless headset microphone. This gives you great sound and flexibility. Test the microphone audio beforehand, ideally while inside the bin, as the transmission and/or acoustics might be affected. If you don't have a headset wireless microphone, you can use a microphone on a stand pointing down into the bin. Although it works, it's not ideal: it's a bit of a distraction as it needs to be set up when the bin is wheeled in and it restricts your movements while inside the bin.

For small audiences and settings, you can get away without a microphone. It helps, however, to look up as you speak.

It's helpful to give a script to the person in charge of slides and audio.

## Writing scripts

Although you're welcome to the scripts in the website, it's not hard to write your own. I've included an **annotated script** in the website, which you can use as an example to work through as you read this section.

I have developed a **story template** (download from the website) that you might find helpful (I do!). The first page is a simple form describing the act, as follows:

- **Bible Bite:** a simple sentence stating the lesson's main point that you want children to remember.
- **Date:** Date on which you performed the script.
- **Passage:** The main Bible passage that you were teaching. I find it helpful to include the actual text as well as the reference.
- **Other Refs:** References to other helpful or relevant Bible passages.
- **Tags:** Keywords describing the topics in the script, so you can look them up later.
- **Key Points:** The main things you want to come across in your script, written for your benefit and not read to students directly but communicated through the script.
- **Props/Materials:** *Anything* other than the puppet that you need to bring along for the act. This is my quick checklist before leaving home on a Sunday for church.
- **Preparation:** What needs to be done on location before the act (e.g. prepare microphones).
- **Debrief:** Notes on how the act went, especially what worked well (and what *didn't*!). This is very helpful for when I want to do a script a second time or when I want to borrow from it for another act.

The actual script is written on the second page onwards. I've created some Microsoft Word styles with some specific formatting to distinguish each. These are:

- **Stinky:** Stinky's lines
- **Leader:** the leader's lines
- **Instruction:** general comments describing required actions – not meant to be read out loud!

Here are some general tips:

- Follow the **standard story structure** that I suggest to start with. It's tested and I've found it to work well. It also gives you a 'skeleton' to flesh out rather than having to start from scratch. For example, aim to repeat the 'Bible Bite' at least three times. As you get more confident, you can create your own skeleton!
- Settle on a **simple and brief 'Bible Bite'**, the main point of the lesson, and stick to it. It may be a profound theological truth, but it needs to be stated simply. While other, secondary truths may

come out in the script, the main point of the lesson needs to be a single concept or truth stated in a single (and simple!) sentence. This is often hard work, but it'll help children remember it and force you to really understand what you're teaching. Here are some examples I've used:

- God raised Jesus to life so we could live forever with him.
  - Christmas is a happy time because Jesus makes us God's friends.
  - Jesus offers us life as a free gift
- Make it **easier for the leader** so they don't have to read off the script, whereas as the puppeteer will have the script in front of them in the bin. Get Stinky to subtly lead the script by asking the questions - it's easier for the leader to respond to Stinky. Likewise, keep the leader's lines shorter.
  - Make it a **dialogue** between Stinky and the leader. More than two sentences per turn is pushing it. The leader's explanation of the passage is usually the longest turn in the script, but you can always break it up with an 'a-ha' and 'really?' from Stinky.
  - Test the script. You can read it out loud by yourself as an initial test of its flow and timing, even if you do this on a section or line while still writing it. You can then read it out loud with the leader to test its timing and cues. It's helpful to operate your puppet while reading the script, as it will help you test and practice any physical interaction between the puppet and the leader (e.g. looks, passing of objects). Lastly, depending on your confidence, how often you've performed with the leader, and the nature of the act and audience, it may be helpful to have a 'full dress rehearsal' with the leader and you in the bin on location, with the PA system you'll use (if any).
  - Keep a **list of ideas**, either concepts or gags. Sometimes hearing a sermon illustration gives me an idea for a story hook that I can flesh out later.
  - I've found keeping scripts to about **two A4 pages** (following my story template) is a good guide for length. However, make sure you adapt to your context. A children's spot during a church service will typically need to be short and punchy, whereas a puppet show centred around Stinky can be longer.

## Educational notes

Although I'm not trained as a teacher, I work in the area of educational technology and have studied the basics of educational theory and design. I've certainly found puppets a great educational technology! I'm therefore interested in the pedagogical aspect of puppets. Below are some notes on the educational design of the Stinky act format:

- It's very **visual**, with Stinky easily drawing the children's attention.
- Stinky is a wonderful **proxy student**. Because of his cheeky personality and not-so-great intelligence, he can ask the important questions that would help the children. Children can easily identify with Stinky and this motivates them to help him answer his question, and thus learn in the process.
- It's **question-driven**. The Bible lesson is driven by a question raised by a character whom the kids like, and hopefully want to help. Thus, children are invited to help and teach Stinky, and are motivated to learn themselves. Instead of a teacher telling a lesson to the kids, the kids are engaged in and motivated to learn for themselves, so they can help Stinky.
- It invites children to make explicit their thoughts by asking them to answer Stinky's question, before the leader turns to the Bible. This allows them to check their beliefs against the Bible.
- It emphasises the **Bible's authority**. As Stinky poses the question, children typically get a chance to have a say, but then the group is referred to the Bible as the final authority.
- It enables the Bible lesson to be communicated in the context of a **dialogue** between Stinky and the leader instead of a monologue, which is much easier for children to listen to.

- The simple and repeated structure of the lessons help the children gain some 'mastery' of what's going on, and hopefully encourages them to get involved.
- It enables **repetition** of the key lesson sentence. The 'Bible Bite' is typically stated at least three times, twice by the children. Stinky always gets it wrong the first time round, which provides a bit of comedy and an opportunity to repeat it and remember it, as the children expect him to get it wrong, and compare his version to the 'right' version. When performed in church, the children could even be invited to 'test' their parents on whether they remember the Bible Bite mid-week.
- Stinky is the **learner**, not the leader. The children are encouraged to help Stinky learn and answer his questions from the Bible. By turning the children into 'teachers' (with the leader's guidance), they are engaged in the act of investigating the Bible for themselves, rather than information simply being 'poured into their heads'. Further, children will naturally identify with Stinky, not the teacher, and thus it makes sense to make Stinky the learner to help the children learn.
- Stinky is the **'goofy' and cheeky character**, not the leader. Sometimes this is reversed, with the leader as the goofy/funny character and the puppet as the teacher. I don't like this because it seems to undermine the leader's authority with the children. It's also a wasted comic opportunity: a puppet will always be funnier than a person, and thus more memorable.

## Possible variations

The format is only a template to start with, I hope you can tweak to whatever works best in your situation. Some ideas:

- Stinky could be a girl!
- Use a different type of puppet
- If you can't find a wheelie bin, there may be another easy staging option

# Puppet Resources

Sonshine Puppets      <http://www.sonshinepuppets.com.au>

Clewer Puppets      <http://clewerpuppets.com>

Folkmanis Puppets      <http://www.folkmanis.com>

Puppet Resources      <http://www.puppetresources.com>

Lots of free scripts with comments.

# Thanks

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