

# SUPERHERO EXERCISE

## Introduction

The purpose of this exercise is to help young and old discover:

- they have things they care about they want to communicate to others
- art is a form of communication
- as artists, they have a unique power to communicate ideas

For all but experienced artists the idea of being an artist (or even creating art), is intimidating. Public speaking is a top fear for a majority of people and, essentially, art is a form of public speech. Isolating aesthetics, leaning on ambiguity, or simply making art without content is comparably much easier than exposing ones true feelings and desires for the world to see. Doing the latter feels so risky!

This assignment is a playful trick. It starts out so absurd that the students can't help but have their guard down. By the time they've realized what's happening, their core desires have been released onto paper. The exercise then provides a framework for working with those ideas.

## Act 1

It starts with a guided meditation of sorts. Read slowly and pause between each section. Let the students put together each piece in their imagination. The total time for this part can be 10-15 minutes.

Prepare the students. Have them get a pen/pencil and paper ready.

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Now we're going to have some fun and time to imagine.

Close your eyes. No one is going to embarrass you and I will watch over the room. So close your eyes and get comfortable.

Imagine that you are a superhero.

You are a superhero. You have a specific power I will tell you about soon. But first, you have an outfit. Imagine what it looks like.

You are very strong and powerful. The wind is blowing through your hair as you look off into the distance like superheroes do.

What are you wearing?

As a superhero, you have super powers. Your superpower is that you can transmit your thoughts. You put brief thoughts or ideas into people's minds. You can do this with any number of people you like - from everyone in the world, to just your friends or family, and everywhere in-between.

Now, you can't make anyone \*do\* anything. Your power is not mind control. But you can cause people to have thoughts.

All superheroes have weaknesses, and your weakness is you can only transmit thoughts three times before you have to leave the planet to recharge.

What I want you to do is imagine what three brief thoughts you would communicate and to what group of people. As you think of them, open your eyes and write them down on the paper. You will not be forced to share these, so you can keep some or all of them to yourself if you like. But choose three and write them down.

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Give them a several minutes to write them down. Make sure the room stays quiet and thoughtful.

Check in occasionally and see how many thoughts people have written. If need be, remind them that they should be brief - a couple sentences rather than a paragraph.

When almost all of them have 3 thoughts on paper, tell the remainder that they should keep writing. Then ask if anyone has one they'd like to volunteer to share.

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Choose a few from the group to read their thoughts aloud.

Some of the responses I've heard are:

“you are a beautiful person”  
“don't have oil spills” (from a 6 year old)  
“I like ice cream” (from another 6 year old)  
“before you speak ask, ‘why am I saying this’”  
“all borders are really just arbitrary lines”  
“why don't you call me”

You should end up with a mix of responses, some personal and many having to do with large philosophical or political ideas.

After getting some responses ask “How many people have something written that might fall under the broad umbrella of ‘making the world better?’”

Most usually raise their hands.

Without the pretense of the superhero visualization, it's much more difficult to get a group of people thinking of the power of their voice and what they have to say.

## Act 2

Explain the following to the students.

Art is your superpower. Like I described before, through art you can transmit ideas and put thoughts into people's minds. And like the superpower we talked about, you can't make anyone \*do\* anything, but you can cause them to have a thought.

Art is a form of communication. We can use it to convey ideas and concepts to different audiences. That may be an audience of a few dozen people at a fancy gallery, or a few hundred people on a train. Depending on what media we use and the venues the work appears in, we have the ability to reach different audiences.

Look at the three things you have written. You have a valuable piece of paper in front of you. This is the starting point for what you care about and what you want to communicate to the world. If you're not making art about

these things, think about that. If you're ever stuck or want to know what to make art about, you can return to these ideas.

This is what we're going to use as a starting point for our next assignment.

## Act 3

Using the first 2 acts, you can get creative with a follow-through project using anything you like. With their super-hero messages I've had students make:

- t-shirts
- post the messages around town
- create giant signs they stand with on the street
- shop-drop the messages into stores

My personal favorite is assigning students to get their messages on to TV, the radio, or the newspaper within one week. This assignment must be delivered with absolute and unwavering confidence and seriousness or it will not work. Students usually ask if the internet counts, and it does not.

The students are usually visibly freaked out - and some are excited. They will ask, panicked, if they can have 2 weeks. I say no.

I then spend the following 20 minutes or so strategizing on how to get any message onto mainstream media. There are many ways, and the easiest is calling into a talk-radio show. Many see this is a fall-back and the panic subsides. The students tend to figure out many ways to get themselves onto the media through the discussion. The results are often impressive - I've had students come back with clips from Good Morning America and Jim Cramer's Mad Money for example.

Students come to understand that they can strategize ways to achieve what they thought to be highly unlikely, that getting on mainstream media is easier than they believed, and it's also a lot of fun.

The superhero visualization also creates a pretense where it's safe to imagine that you are powerful and let's the students voice and ideas emerge.

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