

BECOMING MR. HOLMES

Chuck Kovacic

“What exactly is in your pockets?”

“How do we know who you are?”

“You’re an imposter!”

You’re likely to encounter such questions while performing as Mr. Sherlock Holmes. While portraying the great detective in various venues for a variety of clients, I’ve had to deal with guests going through my pockets, following me into the washroom to see if I maintain “character” and asking for formal identification. Whether in the classroom, on the stage or in an office, you’ll also encounter people who have no idea who Sherlock Holmes is.



Although hosting “Murder Mystery” events and presenting programs for corporate and school audiences can be an enlightening experience, for a performer, it can also be a challenging one. Younger people may be encountering this world for the first time, while their parents may want to hear about a Sherlockian book drive or writing contest. Reaching these new audiences can be a useful introduction to the stories and period that we all love. A different perspective can also be given if performing as Dr. Watson or Mrs. Hudson. Each will bring their personal narrative to any presentation and you’ll need sharp improvisational skills.

In terms of Sherlockian presentations, any audience will likely fall into three equal groups: one that doesn’t know who he is; one that doesn’t care who he is; and one that knows exactly who he is and will ask detailed questions and hang on your every word. Introducing yourself to the first group, winning over the second and topping the third is the challenge.

As a dedicated Sherlockian you already possess basic knowledge of the Canon but in the process of discussing Mr. Holmes, you will also be called upon to provide general information about the Victorian age: its architecture, literature and sciences. You must become an expert in all of these areas. Unfailingly, there will be people who delight in tripping you up on some meaningless point to demonstrate their superior knowledge. This “knowledge,” by the way, is often gained by watching television or seeing movies rather than through actual research. This itself presents a challenge, since entertainment images carry a great deal of power, even when they are incorrect and illogical. Your best defense is to be completely prepared and ready to address misconceptions. You’ll need to convince them that you’re the “real deal.” Remember, you are a guide to an exciting era and many want to share in that experience.

First and foremost, you’ll be judged on your attire. While performing as Holmes I’ve collected costuming for “day wear,” “evening,” “formal,” and “city and country.” Every layer of authenticity that you can bring to your presentation will further demonstrate your expertise. Dramatically entering a room, taking out a pocket watch from the vest pocket and flourishing a business card with the Baker Street address never fails to impress. What you have in your pockets should be equally authentic: coins, business cards. (I once made the mistake of bringing my wallet, which some enterprising “guest” picked from my pocket. Suddenly, I was “Mr. Kovacic” instead of “Mr. Holmes” and the spell was broken.

Know your audience. Before any presentation, I submit a questionnaire to the organizers to determine to whom I'm speaking, as well as other particulars. Will I be speaking from a platform? In the round? Doing a "one-on-one" or a staged program? Does the building that we're in have any significance? Will the audience know of my impending arrival? Who are the key members in attendance? Learning a few names and basic information beforehand always astounds: "I understand, Mr. Jones, that you've recently returned from vacation and that you enjoy antiques. This reminds me of circumstances connected with the Red-headed League!" Part of the Holmesian mystique is the ability to make such pronouncements and connections. So, once again, know your audience.

Always tell the truth! This allows you the benefit of never being corrected! I once weaved in a plot point that I had fabricated involving Shakespeare. To my dismay there happened to be an actor performing in "Julius Caesar" in the audience. When I was unable to offer detailed insight into this production, members of the audience deemed me a fraud. Is that unrealistic? Yes, of course. But be prepared for such expectations. And be careful about whatever it is that you're discussing. People expect that Holmes is an expert on all matters. I only extracted myself by acknowledging that I was not interested in the "history" plays and that I preferred "The Tempest," with which I was familiar. It becomes a bit of conversational "smoke and mirrors."

Respect the audience! To begin with, remember the information gathered with your questionnaire. Only perform for the right audience. I once made the mistake of doing a presentation on deductive reasoning for a gathering of attorneys who delighted in pulling apart my case-work. I was unable to address pointed legal remarks and many were vocal in their displeasure both with my booker and myself. Either I needed to become an expert on those aspects of law or I should have declined the booking. I got out of that one by reminding everyone that I often relied on Scotland Yard to sort out any legal matters.

Remember that you are a Victorian. As such, you have no knowledge of modern events or preferences. I once had a group of 4th graders ask me what my favorite food was. When I said that Mrs. Hudson prepared a grand "game pie" the students were horrified when I explained its contents. They simply could not comprehend that I had no idea of what their favorite dinner, pizza, was or that I had never traveled in an airplane. Always focus your conversation back to the topics that you do know and are comfortable with. By doing so you're less likely to trip up. You're their introduction to the late 19th century!

Explain why you've appeared at this time before this particular group! Are you to introduce a book drive or short story project? But don't stray too far. Younger students can easily misunderstand your presence and the older ones can be disruptive. I must confess that I find "middle school" students to be particularly difficult (an observation supported by many friends who teach at those grade levels). *"How is it that you were born in 1854 and yet seem hale and hearty today?"* One student wanted to know what it was like to be "dead." Another wanted to know the secret of everlasting life. I always explain that such matters are left to philosophers and that my reason for being with them was that a "bit of Sherlock Holmes is alive in all of us." I then announce that I will help them solve the "Mystery of the Missing Box." This allows for a diverting scenario in which all manner of topics could be found within that box. I would then enlist the aid of those who had been reluctant to participate to win them over. Often, the threat of this spotlight deters further disruption. It also maintains focus if there is a promise of some sort of award or prize to me given.

Join the Holmes Team! Do yourself a favor: always have a teacher or supervisor in attendance. Their presence will help maintain discipline and focus. They will also be doing the follow-up to your program and will be responsible for implementing it. Having them involved from the start insures success at the finish. Let them know that you are available in an advisory capacity. Offer a follow-up visit and remind everyone that you'll be there to select the winners of any contest. The current educational environment has been stressed by endless cutbacks, funding diversions, competing agendas and mandated testing and teaching requirements. Don't despair! Your visit can be a useful diversion from these issues allowing some lucky instructor the opportunity to complement a writing or reading program.

Sherlock Holmes is always in control! Unfortunately, our detective did not suffer fools easily. On one excursion a guest repeatedly badgered me for the same information that I already had patiently explained three times. She simply had not been paying attention and was distracted by the lunch about to be served. She burst into tears when I "maintained character" and scolded that my explanation had been sufficient and that I would not be offering any more information. *"Why is Mr. Holmes so mean?"* So, remember that for many people, meeting Sherlock Holmes is a major event and that you'll have to eliminate the more negative aspects of his behavior. A kinder, gentler Holmes, perhaps?

Listen, listen, and listen to your audience! I often overhear classroom or workplace gossip which I can immediately incorporate into my presentation. Modern attention spans are not infinite. With this in mind, I keep many of my presentations under 30 minutes. Brevity is a blessing, as it will force you to focus the attention to the predetermined task at hand. Let the audience know what the topic is and the purpose of your visit, and, most importantly, why your visit matters.

Whatever Canonical character you make offer of, know that your final reward is inviting a newcomer into a world that has inspired and intrigued *you*. To successfully entice an audience you must totally commit to all of these aspects. Any missteps and "the game" may be over before you've begun to play it. So, play it well!

Chuck Kovacic's web page [chuckkovacicarts.com] includes "Baker Street Los Angeles" – photos and details of his recreation of Holmes' sitting room at 221b Baker Street. [221bbakerstreetla.com]