

THE LOST-AND-FOUND INVESTIGATION

A Three-Person Comedy Scene

Suggested Ages: 11–16

Approx. Time: 7–9 minutes

Difficulty: Intermediate

Characters: 3, gender-flexible

Genre: Comedy / Verbal Comedy / Escalating Absurdity

Props: Table, chairs if desired, cardboard box or lost-and-found bin, one shoe, several miscellaneous lost items, clipboard and pencil

Skills Practiced: Comic timing, listening and reacting, characterization, verbal comedy, escalation, maintaining character, purposeful pauses, pacing, physical reactions, object work, callbacks, contrasting character objectives, sharing focus, and ensemble rhythm

Characters

RILEY — Taking the responsibility of running the lost-and-found table much more seriously than necessary. Riley likes procedures, categories, and things that make sense. Riley begins as the clearest voice of reason, but mounting frustration becomes an important part of the comedy.

SAM — Confident, logical in a highly questionable way, and remarkably difficult to argue with because every answer creates a new problem. Sam should not be played as foolish. Sam genuinely believes the reasoning makes sense and is often able to defend it just well enough to keep the argument alive.

CASEY — Arrives looking for a missing water bottle and expects the visit to take approximately thirty seconds. Casey is pulled into the investigation, initially siding with Riley but gradually discovering that some of Sam's ridiculous arguments have an uncomfortable amount of logic behind them.

Performance Note

The comedy works best when the actors do not behave as though they are telling jokes. Each character should take the problem seriously. Sam believes the questions are legitimate, Riley genuinely wants a simple lost-and-found system to function normally, and Casey genuinely wants to find a water bottle and leave. The increasingly absurd logic becomes funnier when the performers remain committed to their objectives.

The Scene

The school lost-and-found table. RILEY is organizing miscellaneous items while SAM examines a single shoe.

SAM: We have a problem.

RILEY: What?

SAM: This shoe.

RILEY: Put it in the box.

SAM: I can't.

RILEY: Why?

SAM: It's not lost.

RILEY: It's in the lost-and-found.

SAM: Exactly. We found it.

RILEY: Somebody lost it.

SAM: We don't know that.

RILEY: Then why is it here?

SAM: Because somebody found it.

RILEY: Because somebody lost it.

SAM: You're assuming.

RILEY: I'm assuming somebody didn't deliberately donate one shoe to the lost-and-found?

SAM: Maybe they did.

RILEY: Why would anybody donate one shoe?

SAM: Maybe they only had one.

RILEY: Nobody only has one shoe.

SAM: I'm holding one.

RILEY: That's not what I meant.

SAM: Then be more specific.

RILEY takes the shoe from SAM.

RILEY: Someone was wearing this shoe. They lost it. Someone else found it. They brought it here. We put it in the lost-and-found until the owner comes to get it.

SAM: So now it's found.

RILEY: Yes.

SAM: Then why are you putting it with the lost things?

RILEY: Because this is where we put things that have been found.

SAM: Then it should be called the found.

RILEY: It's called the lost-and-found.

SAM: Pick one.

RILEY: It can be both.

SAM: Not at the same time.

RILEY: Of course it can.

SAM: Something cannot be lost and found at the same time. Those are opposites.

RILEY: It's lost to the owner and found by us.

SAM: So the shoe is lost depending on who's looking at it?

RILEY: Basically.

SAM: That's a terrible system.

RILEY: It's worked for hundreds of years.

SAM: This school hasn't been here for hundreds of years.

RILEY: I mean lost-and-found.

SAM: This one?

RILEY: Lost-and-found in general.

SAM: How do you know?

RILEY: Because people lose things!

SAM: And then they find them.

RILEY: YES.

SAM: So eventually you won't have a job.

RILEY stares at SAM.

RILEY: This isn't my job.

SAM: Then why are you doing it?

RILEY: Because Ms. Parker asked us to.

SAM: Did she lose something?

RILEY: No.

SAM: Then why is she involved?

RILEY: Can we please just inventory the shoe?

RILEY picks up the clipboard.

RILEY: Item: one shoe.

SAM: Which one?

RILEY: The one you're looking at.

SAM: No. Which shoe?

RILEY: What do you mean?

SAM: Left or right?

RILEY examines it.

RILEY: Right.

SAM: Whose right?

RILEY: The person's right.

SAM: What person?

RILEY: The person who owned the shoe!

SAM: We don't know who that is.

RILEY: We don't need to know who they are to know it's their right shoe.

SAM: How do you know they're right-handed?

RILEY: That has nothing to do with—

CASEY enters.

CASEY: Hey, is this the lost-and-found?

RILEY: Yes.

SAM: Technically.

CASEY: I lost something.

RILEY: Great.

CASEY: Great?

RILEY: No. Not great that you lost something. Great that you're here. Because we can help you find it.

SAM: Assuming it's here.

CASEY: Okay.

SAM: And assuming it's actually lost.

CASEY: It is.

SAM: How do you know?

CASEY: Because I can't find it.

SAM looks at RILEY.

SAM: That's not proof.

RILEY: Don't start.

CASEY: I just wanted to see if somebody turned it in.

RILEY: Absolutely. What did you lose?

CASEY: My water bottle.

SAM: What color?

CASEY: Blue.

SAM picks up the shoe.

SAM: This isn't it.

CASEY: That's a shoe.

SAM: I know.

CASEY: Then why did you—

SAM: It's not blue.

CASEY: My water bottle is blue.

SAM: Right. This isn't.

CASEY: I know.

SAM: Good. We've eliminated the shoe.

CASEY: I had already eliminated the shoe.

SAM: Without examining it?

CASEY: Yes.

SAM: That's reckless.

RILEY: Ignore Sam.

SAM: That's also reckless.

RILEY searches the lost-and-found.

RILEY: Blue water bottle. Blue water bottle...

CASEY: It has a black lid.

SAM: Important information.

CASEY: And a sticker on the side.

RILEY: What kind of sticker?

CASEY: I don't remember.

SAM: That's suspicious.

CASEY: Why?

SAM: If it's your water bottle, you should know what's on it.

CASEY: I know there's a sticker.

SAM: What does it say?

CASEY: I don't know.

SAM: What does it look like?

CASEY: I don't know.

SAM: Are you sure it's your sticker?

CASEY: It's on my bottle.

SAM: That wasn't the question.

RILEY: Sam, we're not conducting a criminal investigation.

SAM: Someone is trying to claim property they cannot accurately identify.

CASEY: I'm trying to find my water bottle!

SAM: Alleged water bottle.

CASEY: What?

RILEY: Stop helping.

SAM: I'm the only one helping.

RILEY: You're interrogating them.

SAM: Because you're about to hand over school property.

RILEY: It's not school property.

SAM: It's on school property.

RILEY: That doesn't make it school property.

SAM: Then why are we responsible for it?

RILEY: We're responsible for returning it to whoever owns it.

SAM: Casey says they own a blue water bottle.

CASEY: I do.

SAM: Lots of people own blue water bottles.

CASEY: Yes.

SAM: Interesting.

CASEY: Why is that interesting?

SAM: You admit there are others.

CASEY: Of course there are others!

SAM: So this could be anybody's.

CASEY: You haven't even found one yet!

RILEY stops searching.

RILEY: That's true.

SAM: What is?

RILEY: We don't have a blue water bottle.

CASEY: Oh.

RILEY: Sorry.

CASEY: That's okay. I just thought I'd check.

CASEY starts to leave.

SAM: Wait.

CASEY: What?

SAM: Where did you lose it?

CASEY: I don't know.

SAM: How can you not know where you lost it?

CASEY: Because if I knew where it was, I'd go get it.

SAM considers this.

SAM: That's actually a good point.

RILEY: Thank you.

SAM: But that creates another problem.

CASEY: Of course it does.

SAM: When did you last have it?

CASEY: Lunch.

SAM: Where?

CASEY: Cafeteria.

SAM: Did you leave it there?

CASEY: I don't know.

SAM: Did you take it with you?

CASEY: I don't know.

SAM: Did you have it after lunch?

CASEY: I don't know!

SAM: Then how do you know you lost it?

CASEY: Because I don't have it!

SAM: Maybe you never had it.

CASEY: I had it.

SAM: Today?

CASEY: Yes!

SAM: You're sure?

CASEY: I drank out of it!

SAM: That doesn't prove you owned it.

CASEY looks at RILEY.

CASEY: Is this person actually supposed to be here?

RILEY: I've been asking myself that for twenty minutes.

SAM: Suppose you drank from somebody else's water bottle.

CASEY: I didn't.

SAM: Accidentally.

CASEY: I didn't.

SAM: Then you walk away thinking you lost your water bottle when actually you never brought yours to school.

CASEY: I brought mine.

SAM: How do you know?

CASEY: Because I had it!

SAM: The bottle you can't identify.

CASEY: I CAN IDENTIFY IT!

SAM: What's on the sticker?

CASEY opens their mouth. Stops.

CASEY: I don't like you.

SAM: That's not on the sticker.

RILEY: Sam!

SAM: I'm narrowing it down.

CASEY: Fine. Forget the water bottle.

SAM: You can't.

CASEY: Watch me.

SAM: No, I mean if you forget it, then you won't know it's missing.

CASEY: That would be wonderful.

SAM: But then if somebody finds it, how would they know you lost it?

CASEY: They wouldn't!

SAM: Exactly.

CASEY: Exactly what?

SAM: That's what I've been saying about the shoe.

Beat.

RILEY: What does any of this have to do with the shoe?

SAM: Everything.

SAM holds up the shoe.

SAM: We keep saying somebody lost this.

RILEY: Somebody DID lose it.

SAM: Maybe they don't know that.

CASEY: How do you not know you've lost a shoe?

SAM: Maybe they have lots of shoes.

CASEY: You usually notice when one comes off your foot.

SAM: Who said they were wearing it?

RILEY: Oh, no.

SAM: Maybe it was in a backpack.

CASEY: Why would you carry one shoe in a backpack?

SAM: Thank you!

RILEY: Don't encourage this.

SAM: That's exactly what I asked.

CASEY: Asked who?

SAM: Riley.

RILEY: You did not ask me why somebody had a shoe in a backpack.

SAM: I would've gotten there.

CASEY: Maybe it's a gym shoe.

SAM freezes.

RILEY: It's a what?

CASEY: A gym shoe. Maybe somebody changed shoes for gym and accidentally left one behind.

SAM looks at the shoe. Then at CASEY.

SAM: That's very good.

CASEY: Thanks.

SAM: You know a lot about this shoe.

CASEY: I made one suggestion.

SAM: A very specific suggestion.

CASEY: You think I stole the shoe?

SAM: I didn't say stole.

CASEY: Good.

SAM: I was thinking misplaced.

CASEY: How could I misplace somebody else's shoe?

SAM: Easily. You misplaced your own water bottle.

CASEY: That's different.

SAM: Why?

CASEY: Because the water bottle is mine!

SAM: Allegedly.

CASEY: STOP SAYING ALLEGEDLY!

RILEY: Everybody stop!

Silence.

RILEY takes the shoe from SAM and puts it firmly into the lost-and-found box.

RILEY: The shoe is going in the box.

SAM: On what grounds?

RILEY: On the grounds that I am putting it there.

SAM: That's not a policy.

RILEY: It is now.

SAM: What if the owner comes back?

RILEY: Then we give them the shoe.

SAM: How do we know they're the owner?

RILEY: They identify it.

SAM: How?

RILEY: They tell us what it looks like.

SAM: We can see what it looks like.

RILEY: THEY tell US.

SAM: But what if they saw it before they lost it?

RILEY: I would expect them to have seen their own shoe!

SAM: Then they already know the answer.

RILEY: That's the point!

SAM: That's a terrible test.

CASEY: He's got a point.

RILEY slowly turns toward CASEY.

RILEY: Don't.

CASEY: I'm just saying, if you're asking the owner what their shoe looks like, obviously they're going to know.

RILEY: THAT'S HOW WE KNOW IT'S THEIRS!

CASEY: Unless they guess.

SAM: Thank you.

RILEY: Nobody is going to randomly guess a shoe!

SAM: Why not?

RILEY: Because nobody even knows we have it!

SAM: Then how is the owner supposed to find it?

RILEY stops.

CASEY: That's actually another good point.

RILEY: I hate this table.

SAM: We need a better system.

RILEY: Fine. What do you suggest?

SAM: We don't tell anybody what we've found.

RILEY: That's your better system?

SAM: Then when somebody comes looking for something, they have to describe it.

CASEY: That's what Riley was saying.

SAM: No. Riley wanted them to describe the shoe.

RILEY: Yes.

SAM: I'm saying they describe what they lost.

RILEY: THAT'S THE SAME THING!

SAM: Not necessarily.

CASEY: How is it not?

SAM: What if they lost something they didn't know they had?

Silence.

RILEY: No.

SAM: Think about it.

RILEY: I refuse.

SAM: Suppose something falls into your backpack without you knowing.

CASEY: Okay.

SAM: Later it falls out.

CASEY: Okay.

SAM: You lost it.

CASEY: I guess.

SAM: But you never knew you had it.

CASEY: Right.

SAM: So you don't know you've lost it.

CASEY: Right.

SAM: Which means you will never come looking for it.

CASEY: Right.

SAM: Which means it stays here forever.

SAM points dramatically at the lost-and-found box.

SAM: That's how this happens.

RILEY and CASEY look at the overflowing box.

Beat.

CASEY: That's actually kind of convincing.

RILEY: No, it isn't.

CASEY: There's a lot of stuff in there.

RILEY: Because middle school students lose things!

SAM: Or—

RILEY: Don't.

SAM: —they never knew they had them.

RILEY: How do you accidentally own a sweatshirt?

SAM: I don't know. That's why it's still here.

CASEY reaches into the box.

CASEY: Hey.

RILEY: What?

CASEY: Look at this.

CASEY pulls out an item.

CASEY: This is mine.

RILEY: Great!

SAM: Is it?

CASEY: Yes.

SAM: Are you sure?

CASEY: Absolutely.

SAM: What is it?

CASEY looks at the item.

CASEY: My lunch bag.

SAM: You came here looking for a water bottle.

CASEY: I know.

SAM: Did you know you'd lost your lunch bag?

CASEY pauses.

CASEY: No.

SAM slowly turns toward RILEY.

SAM: Thank you.

RILEY: No.

SAM: They lost something they didn't know they'd lost.

RILEY: That doesn't prove—

CASEY: Wait.

RILEY: What?

CASEY: If I didn't know I'd lost this...

CASEY looks into the box.

CASEY: ...what else have I lost?

SAM and CASEY stare into the lost-and-found.

RILEY: Nothing.

CASEY: You don't know that.

RILEY: Casey.

SAM: We need to investigate.

RILEY: No, we don't.

CASEY: Is that my sweatshirt?

RILEY: You came here for a WATER BOTTLE!

CASEY: I can look for two things.

SAM: Three.

CASEY: What's the third?

SAM holds up the shoe.

SAM: Have you ever owned this shoe?

CASEY: No.

SAM: That you know of.

CASEY studies the shoe.

RILEY: Do not try it on.

CASEY: I wasn't going to.

Beat.

CASEY: What size is it?

RILEY: NO.

SAM checks inside the shoe.

SAM: Wait.

RILEY: What now?

SAM: There's a name in it.

Beat.

RILEY: There's a WHAT?

SAM: A name.

RILEY: You've been holding that shoe this entire time!

SAM: I wasn't looking inside it.

RILEY: Why not?!

SAM: I was investigating how it got here.

RILEY: READ THE NAME.

SAM looks inside.

SAM: Casey.

Silence.

RILEY slowly looks at CASEY.

CASEY looks at the shoe.

CASEY: Huh.

RILEY: Is that your shoe?

CASEY: No.

SAM: It has your name in it.

CASEY: Lots of people are named Casey.

SAM: Interesting.

CASEY: Stop saying “interesting.”

RILEY: What size shoe do you wear?

CASEY: I'm not answering that.

RILEY: WHY?

CASEY: I don't like where this investigation is going.

SAM: Try it on.

CASEY: I'm not trying on some random lost shoe!

SAM: You mean found shoe.

RILEY: I am begging both of you.

CASEY looks at the shoe again.

CASEY: Wait.

RILEY: What?

CASEY: I know whose that is.

RILEY: Whose?

CASEY: My brother's.

Beat.

SAM: Is his name Casey?

CASEY: No.

RILEY: THEN WHY IS YOUR NAME IN HIS SHOE?

CASEY: Because it used to be mine.

Silence.

SAM: So you did own the shoe.

CASEY: Years ago!

SAM: But you forgot.

CASEY: I didn't forget! I grew out of it and gave it to my brother.

SAM: So it was yours.

CASEY: It WAS mine.

SAM: And you didn't know it was here.

CASEY: Correct.

SAM: And you weren't looking for it.

CASEY: Correct.

SAM: Because you didn't know it was lost.

CASEY realizes where this is going.

CASEY: Oh, no.

SAM slowly turns toward RILEY.

SAM: I rest my case.

RILEY: You don't have a case!

SAM: I have a shoe.

RILEY: It's Casey's brother's shoe!

SAM: Which used to belong to Casey.

CASEY: Technically.

RILEY: Stop helping!

SAM: So who owns it?

CASEY: My brother.

SAM: Then why does it have your name in it?

CASEY: Because it used to be mine.

SAM: So the name doesn't identify the owner.

RILEY: Apparently not.

SAM: Which means your identification system doesn't work.

RILEY: Fine.

SAM: And Casey lost something they didn't know they'd lost.

CASEY: Technically my brother lost it.

SAM: Can you prove that?

CASEY: No.

SAM: Interesting.

CASEY: I really don't like you.

RILEY takes the clipboard, writes something, tears off the page, and places it on the table.

CASEY: What are you doing?

RILEY: I'm making a sign.

SAM: What does it say?

RILEY: "UNATTENDED."

SAM: Why?

RILEY: Because I'm leaving.

RILEY exits.

SAM and CASEY watch RILEY go.

Beat.

CASEY: Did Riley just abandon the lost-and-found?

SAM: Looks like it.

CASEY: So now the lost-and-found is lost?

SAM considers this very seriously.

SAM: No.

Beat.

SAM: We know where it is.

CASEY nods.

CASEY: Good point.

They both look at the shoe.

CASEY: So...what do we do with that?

SAM: Put it in the found.

CASEY: Where's that?

SAM points to the lost-and-found box.

SAM: Right there.

Blackout.

Teacher Notes & Performance Guidance

What Makes the Scene Work

The central comic device is a serious argument built on increasingly questionable logic. The characters are not trying to entertain one another. Riley wants to complete a simple responsibility, Sam wants the system to make logical sense, and Casey wants to retrieve a missing water bottle. The audience laughs because each attempt to solve the problem creates another problem.

Students should avoid turning Sam into a caricature or playing Riley as angry from the beginning. The scene needs room to escalate. Riley's frustration should grow because Sam keeps finding new objections. Casey's involvement should also develop gradually: Casey begins as an outsider, becomes another person frustrated by Sam, and eventually starts agreeing with some of Sam's logic.

Skills Practiced

- Comic timing and purposeful pauses
- Listening and reacting instead of waiting for the next line
- Deadpan delivery and commitment to absurd circumstances
- Escalation: allowing frustration, confidence, and confusion to build
- Character objectives and contrasting points of view
- Vocal variety without relying on constant shouting
- Physical reactions and use of a central prop
- Callbacks and recurring comic ideas
- Maintaining pace during rapid dialogue
- Ensemble rhythm and sharing comic focus among three performers

Character Coaching

RILEY: Begin relatively patient and practical. Riley expects the shoe question to be solved almost immediately. The comedy becomes stronger if the frustration grows in stages rather than beginning at maximum intensity. Even the shouted lines should feel earned by everything that came before them.

SAM: Play the reasoning sincerely. Sam is funniest when there is no wink to the audience and no suggestion that Sam knows the argument is ridiculous. Sam listens carefully, notices loopholes, and treats every new piece of information as evidence.

CASEY: Enter with a completely different rhythm and objective. Casey has no interest in the shoe debate and simply wants a water bottle. As the scene progresses, Casey is slowly absorbed into Sam's logic. The moments when Casey reluctantly admits that Sam has a point should be allowed to land.

The Shoe as a Comic Prop

The shoe should remain visible for most of the scene because it is the physical center of the argument. Avoid excessive business with it. Small choices - examining it, taking it away, putting it in the box, pulling it back out, finally looking inside - will be more effective if they correspond to changes in the conversation. The late discovery of Casey's name should feel obvious in hindsight but should not be telegraphed earlier.

Pacing and Pauses

Much of the dialogue should move briskly, particularly once the arguments begin bouncing among all three characters. However, speed alone is not comic timing. Several pauses are written into the scene because the audience needs a moment to recognize the absurdity or because a character needs time to process what was just said. Do not rush past the silent reactions after major reversals such as Casey admitting the lunch bag is theirs or Sam discovering the name inside the shoe.

Avoid Playing Every Line for a Laugh

If actors emphasize every punch line, the scene can become exhausting and the characters may stop feeling believable. Encourage students to pursue the characters' objectives instead. Some of the funniest lines should sound like ordinary answers. The humor comes from the logic of the conversation and the reactions it produces.

Teacher Exercise: The Logic Chain

Have the cast identify each major argument and trace how one statement causes the next. For example: the shoe has been found → Sam argues it is no longer lost → Riley explains that it remains lost to the owner → Sam questions whether an object can be lost and found simultaneously. Students can mark these turns in the script and practice making each new objection sound as though it genuinely follows from the previous statement.

Teacher Exercise: Reaction Rehearsal

Rehearse selected sections once with the speaking actor delivering the lines normally while the other performers concentrate almost entirely on listening and reacting. Then repeat the section and keep the reactions that felt truthful. This is especially useful for the moments when Sam says something that temporarily stops Riley or Casey because, against all expectations, the point almost makes sense.

Teacher Exercise: Escalation Levels

Choose a section involving Riley's frustration and rehearse it three ways: too calm throughout, too intense from the beginning, and then with a gradual build. Discuss which version gives the scene somewhere to go. Repeat the exercise with Casey's growing involvement and Sam's increasing confidence.

Teacher Exercise: The Straight-Faced Version

Ask the cast to perform a section without intentionally trying to make anyone laugh. They should treat the lost-and-found problem as if it genuinely matters. Afterward, discuss whether the comedy became stronger when the performers stopped signaling the jokes.

Discussion Questions

- Which character seems most reasonable at the beginning? Does that change during the scene?
- Why can Sam's arguments sound convincing even when the conclusions are ridiculous?
- Where does Casey stop being an outsider and become part of the argument?
- Which pauses or silent reactions are important to the comedy?
- How does the lunch bag discovery change the balance between Riley and Sam?
- Why is the discovery of Casey's name inside the shoe an effective callback and reversal?
- How does the final exchange return the audience to the argument from the beginning?
- What would happen to the comedy if the actors behaved as though they knew everything they said was funny?

Optional Extension: Improvise Another Lost Item

After students understand the characters, give them a different lost object - a single glove, an unlabeled notebook, an umbrella, a lunch container, or another ordinary school item - and let the three characters improvise a short continuation. The objective is not simply to invent jokes. Students should maintain the established character logic: Riley wants a workable system, Sam finds problems in the system, and Casey becomes unwillingly involved.

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