



Sample Pages from Distance Learning

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DISTANCE LEARNING

A VIRTUAL DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Christian Kiley



Distance Learning

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Characters

13 Any Gender

- Maestro:** A teacher trying to have a good attitude about distance learning.
- Rules:** A student who knows, recites, and celebrates the rules.
- Techie:** A student who has all the tech gadgets.
- Reenter:** A student who keeps exiting and reentering.
- Close:** A student who is almost always very close to the camera.
- Afar:** A student who is almost always as far away from the camera as they can be.
- Freeze:** A student who keeps glitching and freezing during the video conference call.
- Mirror:** A student who uses the video conference call as a chance to primp and check out their own image.
- Screen:** A student who has their video turned off for almost the entirety of the play.
- Talktalk:** A student who loves to tell stories about their Nana.
- Shush:** A student who seems to fear distance learning and does not speak for most of the play.
- Rebel:** A disruptor who is constantly trying to keep the class off task.
- Boombomb:** A person who derives a great deal of joy from interrupting video conference sessions.

Setting

A distance learning class via video conference call.

Time

The Present.

Dedicated

To the students, teachers, and parents who are continuing to adjust to the challenges in school and life.

You are not alone.

You are never truly alone.

Production Notes

The goal with this play (and it is a lofty one) is to allow the audience to experience what it is like to be a student in a virtual classroom. The audience will realize at some point that they are the new student referred to in the script.

Each character's name is a somewhat superficial quality that they exhibit throughout the play. But upon closer examination, the other characters and the audience should realize that this is merely a protective layer that hides the true feelings and circumstances of each character. For example, Freeze might annoy the teacher and other students, but the glitchy connection ultimately represents a struggle that they are facing in their life.

“This is the challenge of our generation. Stop trying to compare it to what you went through. We are not you. We will figure this out. We just need the space and time to do it.” (Shush)

There is a light that you feel, a warmth, when you enter a room (even a virtual one) and people are glad to see you, happy to see you. You absorb that warmth and can spread it to others, maybe to the world.

The actors will all start with their video off. When prompted, all the screens will snap on together. All of the characters, including MAESTRO will look into their cameras as if they can see the audience. A look something like, "I see you, newbie. I'm always watching."

RULES: I think it's time to get class started. If everyone would please turn your screens on and your mics off. Maestro, you may begin.

Everyone except SCREEN has their screen on.

MAESTRO: Thank you, Rules. I truly appreciate you. I don't play favorites. Except on dating sites. Just kidding. Actually, I'm not.

REBEL: Your old person's humor is even better on video conference than in person.

MAESTRO: Why thank you, Rebel.

REBEL: That was sarcasm. Everyone got that, right? I mean except for Oldie the Online Dater.

MAESTRO: I am your teacher.

REBEL: True! Did I pass?

MAESTRO: Actually, yes. If school were to end today, right now, you would pass this class. As much as I want that to be untrue and I want it to be untrue with every fiber of my being, I am not so jaded that I can merely do what I feel like despite the repercussions. You are lost, Rebel. But you will find your way.

REBEL: There is nothing I can do to make you hate me, is there?

MAESTRO: I admire your can-do-attitude. Or maybe it's a can't-do-attitude.

REENTER: Excuse me, Maestro. May I please be excused for a moment?

MAESTRO: Of course. You all know the rule. If you need to go to the bathroom you simply go.

RULES: As per the distance learning conduct guide and rulebook, turn off your camera and mic before leaving.

REENTER turns off their camera and mic.

REBEL: We don't want to be hearing any of your porcelain business details.

TALKTALK: My Nana loves porcelain dolls. It's like a business to her. She collects them, you might say obsessively. But that would be rude. And as much as my Nana loves porcelain dolls, she hates rudeness. Like she will get so rude about being rude that the exponential rudeness will reduce all other rudeness in the world. I have never seen Nana so unnerved that she would throw a porcelain princess against a wall, for example. I did once hear her tell her neighbor that she was as Rude as Randy Rudy's ruby red rutabagas and ripe wrinkled raisins, which in retrospect makes no sense. Raisins are never ripe.

FREEZE: That's crazzz – (*freezes and continues to make sounds in a glitched state*)

RULES: Though there are no specific rules against glitching—

REBEL: There is a Starbucks down the block with free WiFi.

RULES: You are not allowed to be in a public location where other non-student individuals might be, unbeknownst to them, and potentially against their will, participants in our distance learning class.

REBEL: They become objects of our ridicule, scorn, and mockery.

REENTER: (*turns camera and mic back on*) Sorry, guys. I'm back. My little brother.

RULES: Do not announce yourself upon returning or reference minor children who are not students in this class.

REENTER: He's struggling in Math. I have to help him. My mom is working so—

RULES: Please keep the conversation curriculum-based and do not divulge personal information to the class.

MAESTRO: We need to meet our new student.

FREEZE: (*gets louder and is still stuck on crazzz – when FREEZE stops*) Sorry, about that. I get glitchy.

REBEL: Your WiFi sucks.

FREEZE: (*genuinely hurt*) Yeah. I know.

RULES: Please do not demean your classmates unless it is during a sanctioned academic activity.

MAESTRO: Or recess or any form of line standing. I got bullied a lot during recess and I think the results speak for themselves.

RULES: As long as the line is straight and the recess is twenty minutes or less but not for high school. In high school we have passing periods, but we do not need them for distance learning.

REENTER: I'm sorry, may I please be excused?

RULES: You do not need to ask that question. Screen and mic off.

REENTER: Sorry, my brother. *(turning off camera and mic)*

CLOSE: *(looking very closely at the camera)* Does anyone else find this awkward?

SCREEN: What part? Because they can't make us have our video on. You know that. I hope you all know that. Go ahead ask me. Ask me.

CLOSE: Will you please turn on your video, Screen?

SCREEN: Not now, not ever!

CLOSE: That seemed like a trick.

SCREEN: You know what's never a trick? I'm not letting you ruin another answer. The truth. The truth is not a trick!

TALKTALK: I used to wonder why they didn't call Trick or Treating, Truth or Treating. Now hear me out. Nana used to love to say that, "now hear me out" and sometimes she would say nothing at all. Like "now hear me out" and then silence. Nothing. But Nana did not like Trick or Treaters. But she didn't want to be rude, remember that story, I'll tell it again soon, so she left her porch light on. "Now hear me out" she would say, "it's my right to leave my porch light on. It's for safety. There were so many grumpy Trick or Treaters. "You made us walk an extra sixteen, seventeen steps, each way. An illuminated porch light means candy. Yes indeed, on Halloween it means candy." And then they both said, at the same exact moment "now hear me out" and Nana found some mustard packets and a canned ham to give that fellow hear-me-outer.

CLOSE: Yeah, I could almost see it, the porch light.

REBEL: I feel like you can see into my soul, Close. If you got any closer your eyeballs would be on my keyboard.

RULES: Keep the discourse curriculum-based and appropriate.

FREEZE: I totalllllll – *(glitches and freezes)*

TECHIE: Bandwidth. That's really what this comes down to. You need more. I like to say, that we have enough bandwidth to operate the Overwatch League Grand Finals (*or another popular game can be referenced*).

RULES: Curriculum-based!

MAESTRO: Sounds right. Why don't we have our new student and hopefully friend introduce themselves to the class.

REENTER: (*turning camera and mic back on*) Sorry. I'm back. Sorry.

REBEL: We know your brother Isaac Newton is having trouble with long division.

REENTER: Don't make fun of my brother! I'll pull you through this tiny little camera hole and –

REBEL: Because that's possible. You don't need to keep exiting and entering, you are already gone. Room for rent, upstairs unit. It's pretty spacious. Cheap too. There is no brain currently occupying it.

REENTER: You're really clever when you're protected by a screen.

SCREEN: Shields up, video down. You can't make me turn my video on. You'll never take my soul.

RULES: Reenter and Rebel, you are both on timeout for verbal altercations including but not limited to: threats, bullying, and negative comments that do not represent the good name and reputation of our school. Please turn your mic and camera off.

REBEL: Tell little Einstein, I said hi.

REENTER: We will return to school one day. And when we do...

REBEL: Promises, promises, hot air and hollow words.

REBEL and REENTER turn off their cameras and mics.

MAESTRO: Settle down, everyone. It doesn't have to be like this.

MIRROR starts primping and preening very actively. This can include adjustments to their clothing, hair, and the subsequent "checking-myself-out" moments.

MAESTRO: May I help you, Mirror?

MIRROR continues making small adjustments and then tilting their head at different angles and making different expressions.

MAESTRO: Mirror! Are you there? Mirror!

MIRROR is really absorbed in what they are doing.

MAESTRO: Mirror. Mirror! MIRROR!

MIRROR: *(still making adjustments)* Yes, Maestro!

MAESTRO: I am sorry to interrupt you. For class. I am so sorry to interrupt you during our class. Our class.

MIRROR: *(continuing to work)* No apology needed. I'm just finishing up.

MAESTRO: Insert Rebel comment here: *(impersonating REBEL)* "You got a hot date tonight. Because you know who doesn't, Maestro."

MIRROR: *(still "finishing up")* That was funny *(not even close to laughing)* and your Rebel impersonation is getting... better.

FREEZE: That's truuuuuuuuuuu – *(freezes)*

MAESTRO: Freeze, can you please?

FREEZE: *(unfreezing)* Wow, I'm back. That was a short one.

TECHIE: Bandwidth. I wrote code for this video game and I titled the file Jack and the Bandwidth. It was like this enormous bandwidth stalk and Jack climbed it and there was this giant goose that was laying gigawatts instead of eggs. Jack made this incredible online omelet of energy and fed the giant and there was free global WiFi for everyone. *(getting choked up)* Free WiFi for every... single... person... on... earth.

MAESTRO: Can we all just please focus. I know it's a challenge. Heck, I want to pet my cat, Murphy. Murphy is right there *(indicating)* within reach. I want to but I can avoid the urge, I can focus.

MAESTRO tries to quickly pet Murphy the cat.

RULES: Please do not use class time bonding with or comforting domesticated animals.

MAESTRO: Are wild animals okay then? Never mind. We haven't even acknowledged our newest student. Can we at least all look at our new student?

Everyone who is not staging a protest or on timeout, looks into their cameras for several seconds. You want to give the audience members the impression that you can see them and that one stray sock on the arm of their couch. As TALKTALK starts to speak, everyone relaxes and returns to normal.

TALKTALK: I see that your room there is in a state of disrepair. My Nana loves rhymes and porcelain dolls. But not rudeness, never that. “Now hear me out” she would say and you would and she would say something about “always knowing” what’s in the background of your video conference call. Although, she wouldn’t know what the heck a video conference call is. That’s Nana. Seeing the future, messy background and all.

RULES: Curriculum-based and appropriate.

MAESTRO: Afar, why are you so far away?

AFAR: (*sitting as far away from the screen as possible*) At school I like to sit in the middlish-back, not the back-back, but definitely not too close to the front.

MAESTRO: But you’re so far away.

AFAR: Yes. I am just more comfortable this way.

RULES: Students must make every reasonable attempt to engage with the curriculum, the teacher, and as needed, but with meticulous and stringent control, other students.

AFAR: I can take things in from afar. It gives me perspective.

SCREEN: It’s your right! Never surrender. Super close to the camera, so far away you need an Uber to get back, video, no video, mic, no mic, bad internet, horrible WiFi, on your phone instead of a—

SCREEN & RULES: ...school-approved technology device.

SCREEN: Too many gadgets, none, rule-quoter, or rule-violator, entering, exiting, on video, though off-video is better and allowed, in fact supported by the law. Primp and preen for the duration of class, silently watching everything and maybe orchestrating a complete global restart. It is all well within our rights. And no more ridiculous than this sham. Distance learning. What a joke.

RULES: Statements that defame or unduly criticize the school are expressly prohibited.

MAESTRO: Can we please stop with this nonsense? We need to meet our new student.

Everyone looks at the camera for three seconds or so.

MAESTRO: We need to focus. Stop blaming the internet for everything! This is our now, our present. And yes, it is no gift but we need to convert this hunk of junk into a functional thing. Because who knows how long this could go on.

RULES: Teachers should stick to the curriculum and not deviate under any circumstances other than an emergency. Approved emergencies are located in the emergency section in the rulebook.

MAESTRO: That can't be in the rulebook.

RULES: The misdemeanor consequence for Reenter and Rebel ends now.

REENTER and REBEL turn their screens on.

REBEL: Just going to play the odds and ask, is there a rule about referring to the rulebook too much?

RULES: You were listening. You broke the terms and conditions of your consequence. It was yours and yours alone to serve according to the mandates within the rulebook.

REBEL: Stupid rules! What good are they doing us now, a pixilated purgatory, so far away from our reality. Mask, no mask, go to the beach, don't go to the beach, open, close, delivery, patio dining, takeout, eat in, vaccine, herd immunity, bubble, no bubble, social distance, high fives, fist bumps, elbow, what are they, rubs, elbow rubs. Wave, smile, frown, outside, inside, political, apolitical, small businesses, enormous companies, distance learning, hybrid, conventional school, the school of our childhood, bad sandwiches, but great cookies. Great warm cookies. Even cranky lunch workers are better than the lonely walk to my marginally filled fridge. *(takes a deep breath)* I'm just lonely.

FREEZE: *(glitching)* Meeee tootootoo.

CLOSE: Me too.

MIRROR: *(still grooming, adjusting, etc.)* Yeah. Me.

SCREEN: It's true.

AFAR: Yep.

TECHIE: Even with HD clarity and surround sound. Yes, those are speakers back there. And yes... alone.

TALKTALK: My Nana is so lonely with porcelain dolls as her only friends.

TALKTALK is overcome with emotion and turns their video off.

RULES: There's no rule for that.

MAESTRO: Talktalk, are you alright?

AFAR: Maybe we should give Talktalk some space?

MAESTRO: Is that what you want, Talktalk? You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. Or you can tell stories about your wonderful Nana.

TALKTALK: She doesn't remember me.

TALKTALK turns their video on.

It's been a long time since I've seen her. Now, I bet she won't remember me at all.

MAESTRO: Now hear me out. I just think we have to believe she does, remember you, and loves you.

TALKTALK: Do you think so, Maestro?

MAESTRO: Yes, I do. And I think in your heart, you do too.

RULES: Teachers should not give unsolicited life advice in a field they are unqualified in and this includes but is not limited to medicine, psychiatry, and auto mechanics.

MAESTRO: Do shut up, Rules!

RULES: (*genuinely offended*) I am most certain there is a rule about telling the student rule-enforcer to shut up.

MAESTRO: I am sorry. That was...

MAESTRO, RULES, & TALKTALK: Rude!

SCREEN: Now hear me out.

They all share a moment of laughter and warmth.

REENTER: Sorry, I have to go. My brother...

REENTER turns off their screen but forgets to turn off their mic.

REENTER: *(with the pace and pauses of a conversation)* What is it now? I know you hate school. I hate school too. And you know what? No one cares. Not a single person. Not one. We are alone. It's just the two of us. I know you're crying. And now I'm crying too. We're both crying like babies. Because that is exactly what we are. Oh, and three times six is eighteen not nineteen! Nineteen is a cursed number. Why? I'll tell you why. COVID-19! Nineteen!

REENTER cries for a few seconds.

REENTER: Yes. You can have some chocolate milk. I love you too.

REENTER turns the video back on.

REENTER: Back. Sorry. Brother.

CLOSE: You left your mic on.

REENTER: Oh. I shouldn't yell at him. It's not his fault.

MIRROR: It's not your fault either. You need to hear that.

REENTER: It's hard. I don't want to get in fights. I want to make my brother proud of me. And my mom too. I want to make her proud.

REBEL: Hey.

REENTER: Yeah, what? You have something to say.

REBEL: Sorry. I'm sorry.

MAESTRO: I think you must have mispronounced whatever that last word was that you spoke.

REBEL: I shouldn't have made fun of your brother. And it doesn't matter that I didn't mean it. It hit you hard all the same.

REENTER: Thanks.

RULES: The effective use of the rules has once again saved the day!

MAESTRO: You have to be kidding. Right? But I think you're serious. You are. You are very, very serious about rules. And they are not helping us, you. They're not helping you.

RULES: I know. But at least they have a purpose, rules. Unlike all this busywork we keep getting. No experiences. Just charts to fill in, summaries to write, endless assignments, staring into the artificial

light, submit, submit, submit. Rules help me make sense of a chaotic world. Maybe they're not really helping me, but they feel like they are.

MAESTRO: I guess we all need those things that bring us comfort. I keep forgetting. We need to meet our newest student.

Everyone stares into the camera as if they can see the individual audience members.

RULES: Shouldn't we utilize our class time properly and stick to the—

EVERYONE: Curriculum!

RULES: It's true. We must have a certain number of classroom minutes in order to get credit, advance in grade level, and eventually graduate.

REBEL: And don't forget all the dollars that are pumped into this giant oil tanker of a business to keep it slogging along. Even now, if you're quiet, you can hear it.

Everyone leans into their monitors as if that will help them "hear it" better. REBEL makes creaking boat sounds, haunted noises, some might be funny, others oddly sinister and frightening.

TECHIE: Stop that nonsense. This is our new beginning. We will live better, longer lives like this. Enhanced. I can't begin to tell you how much more comfortable, convenient, and fulfilling life will be. Embrace it.

REBEL: Didn't you just say that you felt alone. We all did.

TECHIE: Of course, absolutely. Forging into the unknown, the future. That is always going to be frightening. No doubt. But it is our time to do it.

MIRROR: (*stops any primping, etc.*) Does it have to be so fast and all at once? That's one of the things I always appreciated about school. There was always a specific sense of time. Fourth grade late October had a very different feel than sixth grade early December. Now it all kind of feels the same. I don't want it all to feel the same. And definitely not all at once. I'm pretty insecure about that. About a lot of things.

CLOSE: Me too. That's why I am so close to the screen.

AFAR: I am that way too. And that's why I like to stay a little farther and further away.

TALKTALK: That's why I tell stories. Brings me comfort. Like Nana. She brings me comfort.

SCREEN: That's actually the reason— (*turns on their video*) I leave my video off. I found some loophole that allowed me to not have to engage and I used it. Granted, I think sometimes there are legitimate reasons to have your video off.

TECHIE: I agree with that.

CLOSE: Me too.

AFAR: Yeah.

MIRROR: Yes, I think there is something to be said about choosing to be alone versus being forced to be alone. Or feeling that way.

RULES: I agree with that. No rule should be so rigid that it can't be malleable in its application to a specific situation.

An awkward pause.

RULES: The rules aren't always right.

REBEL: That's a big step for you, Rules.

RULES: Yeah, I guess it is.

MAESTRO: My goodness, we keep forgetting about our new friend. Would you please introduce yourself?

Everyone looks at the camera for three seconds.

MAESTRO: Well, I guess you will introduce yourself when you are ready. Welcome. Welcome to (*insert the name of your school*) Distance Learning Community. We are very glad you are here. Now, if we can all turn to page eighty of our textbooks, we can get started on our lesson.

FREEZE: I never gottttttttttt... (*freezes*)

SCREEN: I didn't get the book either.

TECHIE: Where would that be in the digital book and audiobook? It helps me get to sleep, listening to textbooks at night. Soothing in the same way the monotone lawyer-lingo is at the end of a pharmaceutical commercial.

AFAR: I don't have the book either.

MAESTRO: Does anyone have the book? I mean, they had a drive-through pickup and everything. It was just like a fast food drive-



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