



Jason Alexander, Actor

The Power of Laughter

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on April 15, 2023 by David Bender

- Access *The Thread* episode of Jason Alexander on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form unedited interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Explore the social science of laughter
- Examine pluralism and the civic value of service

English Language Arts Focus

- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one actor
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Incorporate *The Thread* episode with Jason Alexander as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

Episode Overview

Jason Alexander explores the impact of fame and the powerful connection between celebrities and their audience. He touches on the influence of his parents and acknowledges a deep connection to the culture and values of his Jewish heritage. Alexander discusses the current state of the world, reflects on the importance of hope, and encourages people not to abandon dialogue.



Biography

Actor Jason Alexander was born Jay Scott Greenspan in Newark, New Jersey, on September 23, 1959. Alexander's interest in the performing arts began at an early age, and he took his stage name at 15. While attending Boston University, the 20-year-old Alexander was cast in the lead of the original short-lived Broadway production of the musical *Merrily We Roll Along*. He continued to perform on and off Broadway, including in a role in *The Rink* with Liza Minelli, before starring in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, for which he won the 1989 Tony Award for Best Actor in a Musical. He is best known for his role as George Costanza in the television series *Seinfeld* (1989-98), for which he was nominated for seven consecutive Primetime Emmy Awards and four Golden Globes. His other well-known roles include Phillip Stuckey in the film *Pretty Woman* (1990), comic relief gargoyle Hugo in the Disney animated feature *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and the title character in the animated series *Duckman* (1994-97). He sang and was part of the writing team that won a Daytime Emmy Award for outstanding original song for "The Bad Guys?" in 2020; the song was used in a Brainwashed by Toons video for the comedy website Funny Or Die that depicted how anti-Semitic images are used in cartoons. Alexander has been married to Daena E. Title since May 31, 1982; they have two sons.



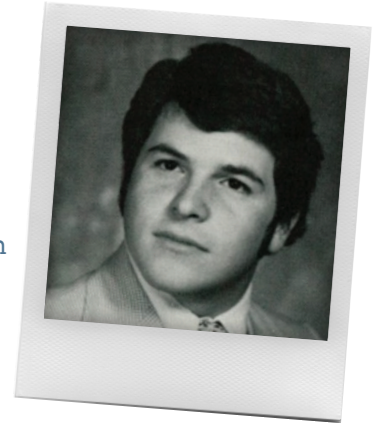
Teaching Tip: **First Take**

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

Suggested Steps

- ▣ **Read** the opening of Jason Alexander's episode aloud to students:

"On any day that the world continues to turn, and we wake up the next day and it's a functioning world. You have to know one thing. There's a shit ton more good people on this planet working for the light than there are not. My birth name. My God-given name, which I always find is a strange phrase, because it's really my mom, although my mom and God are very close. I was born as Jay, not Jason, Jay Scott Greenspan. I am still Jay Scott Greenspan. And if you do know me, you probably know me as Jason Alexander, because when I was 14, I joined my first acting union. It wasn't about, you know, hide the Jewishness of Greenspan. It was about playground trauma. I was green. Fill in the blank with any horrible thing you wanted. So when I went to get a stage name, they said, "Would you like a stage name?" I said, "Yes, I would." My mom named me Jay, but always called me Jason. So I was used to Jason and I said, "Okay, I'm going to be Jason Scott," and the woman at the AFTRA counter said, "We have 11 of them and every spelling you can come up with so you can't have it." And in a blind panic, I never thought about another name I went, "Oh, but my dad doesn't feel great about me wanting to lose his name. So I'll just say, How about Jason Alexander? Because my dad was Alex Greenspan." And they said, "Yeah, you know that." So it was barely a full thought in the blink of a moment and out of necessity, always born out of necessity. I don't do anything if it isn't a necessity."



- ▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Alexander from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?
- ▣ **Next,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on what he shared, or have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.
- ▣ **Last,** as a class, discuss why they think the filmmakers chose this opening for the episode.



Teaching Tip:

THE THREAD Up Close

After watching the interview, have students debrief this episode. Here are several suggested questions:

- How do you define the power of laughter? How does the title of this episode reflect Jason Alexander’s life story?
- What ideas or stories did he tell that you felt most connected to?
- If you were interviewing Alexander, what would you like to ask him?

After discussing, have students return to **The Thread** episode and engage students in a close read and analysis of his interview using the video and transcript. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning **The Thread** with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of **A Thread** connection: If you are asking students to explore the theme of hope you could highlight Jason Alexander’s words, beginning with this sentence:

“Yes, I think there is reason for hope globally. The narrative that we are being fed right now in this year of our Lord, 2023, is of desperation and division and a lot of the division perhaps being a byproduct of desperation.”

Connections

- Can you recall a time when telling your story helped another person?
- Whose story has given you solace or helped you feel less alone?
- Can you think of a time that your work made the world, your community, your workplace, your school a better place?
- Who do you think of when you think of people who are making a difference in your life today?
- Do you look at celebrities as being different from other people? Why?
- Jason Alexander shared that he was a kid who didn’t fit in, but acting gave him community and a sense of belonging. Where do you feel accepted into a community with other people?
- Who or what makes you laugh?
- What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?



Photos: Actors Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jerry Seinfeld, and Jason Alexander talk in between filming the last episode of the hit television show *Seinfeld* April 3, 1998 in Studio City CA. (left); Jason Alexander laughs with Elmer Tafoya after saying he would only give autographs to people who brought him unregistered voters, Sept 25 2004. (right)



Activity: The Power of Laughter

Dr. Robert Provine, a pioneering neuroscientist, brought scientific rigor to the study of laughter. Among his many findings, he explained that laughter is part of a universal human vocabulary, a powerful social bond, and a social signal. Jason Alexander's episode (and his work) confirms this.



(Note: This excerpt has been edited for clarity and brevity.)

"In my particular case through the Seinfeld show, the most resonant thing I hear about is that idea of a shared experience – people who come up to tell me about some very challenging times they were going through in their life. Anything from the loss of a child or a parent to a personal illness to serving overseas in the military. You name it. A period of time where joy was elusive. And they approached me to thank me for helping them to laugh, helping them to reconnect to some kind of happiness, joy, laughter, and how therapeutic and appreciated it was. So there's that bond."

Choose one exercise

- Find something that makes you laugh and share it with someone – a friend, parent, or teacher.
- Explore the archive of Jason Alexander's career on [Seinfeld](#).
- For Psychology courses, choose one of the Additional Resources exploring the neurobiology of laughter.



Additional Resources

Learn more about the science of laughter:

- [Tig Notaro on the Healing Power of Laughter](#), *Chasing Life* podcast, June 29, 2021
- ["Uncovering the neurobiology of laughter."](#) Professor Sophia Scott, University College London

