



Frank Langella, Actor

Unscripted Wisdom

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on
on September 19, 2023 by David Bender

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

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Discuss the changes in the acting profession through the lens of Frank Langella's experiences
- Reflect on the importance of intergenerational relationships and wisdom gained from elders
- Analyze the impact an actor can have on shaping culture

English Language Arts Focus

- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one actor
- Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes in the episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- Analyze, reflect on, and discuss the title "Unscripted Wisdom" after watching the episode
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use Frank Langella's episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

Episode Overview

Frank Langella's six-decade career as an actor has earned him four Tony awards for his work on the Broadway stage, an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor, and television's highest honor, the Emmy Award. In this profoundly insightful episode of **The Thread**, we meet the man behind the artistic mask. Frank Langella has portrayed iconic characters, from a tortured ex-president (*Frost/Nixon*) to an immortal Transylvanian Count (*Dracula*). The Frank Langella you will meet in this episode is a complex and deeply thoughtful human being. Now, at age 86, he shares his hard-earned wisdom with eloquence and humility. He sums it up best in one sentence: "It's important to always live life, at any age, with a question mark, not an exclamation point."



Biography

Frank Langella is an award-winning stage and film actor. Born in Bayonne, New Jersey, he followed his passion for acting after high school, studying drama at Syracuse University. His career took off in 1970 with a role in Mel Brooks' *The Twelve Chairs*, and in 1975, he earned his first Tony Award for *Seascape*. His critically acclaimed portrayal of *Dracula* on Broadway in 1977 became one of his defining roles, which he later reprised on film. Langella's ability to embody bold and diverse characters has been evident throughout his five-decade-long career, with standout performances like Jaro Essa in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and Al Baker in *Law & Order: SVU*. His portrayal of Richard Nixon in *Frost/Nixon* (2009) earned him an Oscar nomination, cementing his place among Hollywood's elite. Recent notable roles include Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger in HBO's *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight* (2013) and Senator Richard Russell Jr. in *All the Way* (2016).



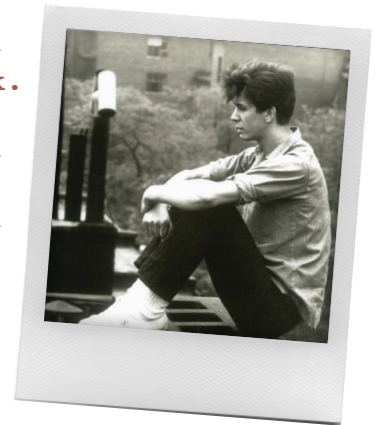
Teaching Tip: First Take

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

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of Frank Langella's episode with students:

"When you're young, very young and growing up, your sentences always end with a question mark. Like 'What?' 'When?' 'Why?' You're always asking your parents or your grandparents that, and then when you get to be old like me, and quite a few of my contemporaries are this way, their sentences end with exclamation points. 'Don't tell me, I know!' 'I'm sure!' You should keep the question mark always. What? Why? Explain that to me. Where have you come from? Who are you? What do you do? It makes life more interesting."



▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Frank Langella as an actor from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?

▣ **Next,** as a class, discuss the role of "the opening" in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?

▣ **Last,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode's title "Unscripted Wisdom." Then, have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



Photos: Frank Langella. (Frank Langella) top; Frank Langella, *Dracula*, 1979. (Moviestore Collection Ltd) lower left; *The Twelve Chairs*, 1970. (RGR Collection) lower right.



Teaching Tip:

The Thread Up Close

Step One: Watch Frank Langella's episode "Unscripted Wisdom" here.

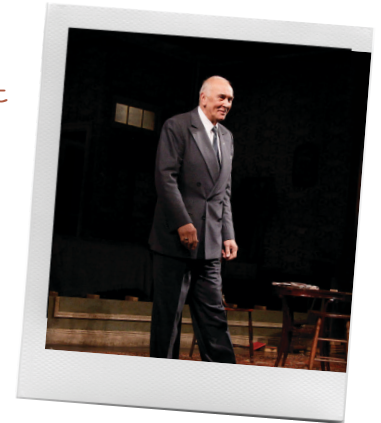
Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ Frank Langella introduces himself as a working actor at 85 years old. What would you like to ask him about his life and career?
- ▣ How would you characterize Langella's philosophy of taking on a role, on taking risks, and embracing the unknown as an actor?
- ▣ How did his childhood, particularly his feeling of not belonging in his Italian family, shape his approach to acting and life?

Step Two: After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of his interview using the transcript and video as a reference. 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* lesson connection: If you are analyzing the emotional, cognitive, and psychological processes involved in acting, read Frank Langella's point of view as a way to introduce this topic.

"When I walk in the dark from my dressing room, and I'm going to make my way to my first entrance, my mind is clear of everything. I don't prepare. I don't think about how to say something. I've done my work and my rehearsals. I am going to leap empty-handed into the void. I'm going to go out there and see what that night brings me. And I only think, mean it – mean the first line you say and mean everything you do. It gets more important to me the older I get that I'm there as a vessel to the writer, and my job is to project to the audience what he wants them to know.



You don't run to the stage to get away from yourself. You run to the stage to find yourself. Saying, "Oh, I can put on makeup and I can do this and I can become another person for a few hours." It's not the way it should be, and I didn't always know it at the start. The way it should be is "I don't know how to be. I have to find myself. Why am I choosing this part? Why do I want to express these emotions?" The road should always be toward finding yourself within whatever it is you're doing. Real power doesn't come from doing and owning and grabbing and making money and all of those things. It comes from the revelation of self. That's real power. When you begin to reveal to yourself who you are and what you are."



Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ▣ Langella recalled at seven years old he felt a calling to be an actor after being part of a school musical and offered the advice, “If you do have a tremendous passion for something young, follow it. It’s what you should be doing.” What is something you are passionate about right now?
- ▣ How did Frank Langella define power? Is it different from your understanding of or perceptions of how power is exercised?
- ▣ What was the most helpful piece of advice that you are taking away from this episode?
- ▣ How do you think acting leads to a deeper understanding of self and of other people, as Frank Langella shared?
- ▣ How do you understand the title after watching this episode? What new or surprising insights did you learn as a result of Frank Langella’s career and point of view?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?

Activity: Unscripted Wisdom

This *Thread* episode ends with Frank Langella sharing a piece of advice given to him from a mentor at a time when he was seeking direction and guidance. She told him, “Be curious. Just be curious,” and it remains a kernel of wisdom he continues to value deeply.

Explain to the class that they will create a collection of “unscripted wisdom” on a shared classroom document. Each student will write a small vignette explaining a piece of advice they value, why it remains important, and who shared it. Have students share it on the class’s shared drive.



Additional Resources

- ▣ Read Frank Langella’s book, [Dropped Names: Famous Men and Women As I Knew Them](#)
- ▣ Explore his many Broadway roles at [Playbill](#) - official website
- ▣ Listen to his podcast - [The Frank Langella Podcast](#)

