

# Papier-mâché Mask Making

## Linked to *Romeo and Juliet*

A project suitable for KS1 and KS2 children



Image: Jan Periton for PSC

### **Introduction**

Papier-mâché is an art form with a long creative history. Essentially a sculpture technique, mashed paper is mixed with some form of paste or binding agent to make objects. The name *papier-mâché* comes from the French, meaning 'chewed paper', yet despite this, the technique actually originated in ancient China. In Britain, papier-mâché was particularly popular during the Georgian and Victorian periods, however the art form has endured over the ages and across cultures, probably due to its versatility. Papier-mâché is both lightweight and strong, meaning it can be used to make items as diverse as furniture, boats and even buildings!

### **Masks and *Romeo and Juliet***

Perhaps best known among papier-mâché art objects are the beautiful masks traditionally made in Italy for Venetian carnival. Masks can be an interesting contribution to the costume design of any theatrical production, but with *Romeo and Juliet* set in Verona, not far from Venice, and with a masquerade ball as the backdrop for the lovers' first meeting in Act 1 Scene V, the opportunity to explore this fascinating art technique with children is too good to pass up.

## Structure of the Project

This mask-making project is designed to take place over **FIVE creative sessions**, with a recommended time of **1.5 – 2 hours per session** (although the more time you can allocate to this project, the stronger the outcome). Please note that ideally the sessions should be spread out over a number of weeks, rather than blocked into one week, as there needs to be significant drying time between each session.

## Key Skills

This project will develop both Fine Art and D&T skills for your children, including:

- Visual literacy/art historical knowledge
- Using drawing to create clear designs
- Working with 3D sculptural materials
- Painting with a focus on colour, detail, pattern and decoration

## SESSION 1: ART HISTORY CONTEXT (approx 1hr) PRACTICAL ACTIVITY (approx 1hr)

It's a good idea to begin any art project by sharing images with the children to give them context for the technique they will be learning. Not only will they gain a greater appreciation of the history of papier-mâché as an art form, but they will have a better understanding of what they might expect to achieve, and a ready source of ideas to use when it comes to the design stage of their project.



Image Credits L-R: Mummers. Hallberg-Cambell, *The Guardian*. Medieval Mystery Plays, MedievalChronicles.com

## The Use of Theatrical Masks

To introduce the project, you might want to start by considering the use of masks generally in theatre or theatrical performance. Why do we use masks, and what purpose do they serve?

Ask children about when they have worn masks or seen them used. Source a wide range of images to prompt discussion – there are endless examples, but as a suggestion you could compare the animal masks used in a production like *The Lion King* with the demon masks used in Middle Age mystery plays, or the folk-inspired

masks used by traditional Mummings. You could consider the role of superstition in Halloween masks, or look at the spiritual meaning behind the masks of traditional Japanese Noh Theatre or the Mexican festival of Dia De Los Meurtos.



Images L-R: Japanese Noh Mask and Scar mask from *The Lion King*, Masks of the World.com; Day of the Dead mask, Pikrepo.com. Below: Punchdrunk *The Drowned Man*. British Library.



Depending on your class, you could introduce more complex concepts such as the use of audience masks (as seen in immersive theatre productions such as Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*) or explore reasons why masquerade is rarely seen in Islamic culture. Finally, to bring your focus to *Romeo and Juliet*, consider the ways in which the masquerade scene has been staged in

film and theatre, and the types of masks that have been used.



Images L-R: *Romeo and Juliet*, The Globe Theatre, London; Still from Julian Fellowes 2013 film of *Romeo and Juliet*.

**To aid your research, see the web links in the RESOURCES section of these plans.**



## Traditional Venetian Masks

Strikingly beautiful papier-mâché Venetian masks have been an essential part of Carnival tradition in the Veneto area of Italy since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, becoming ever more popular as society became more decadent. People wore masks to conceal their identities in order to take part in illicit activities!



Image: Venice Events.co.uk

Venetian masks usually fall into one of two types – *Carnival* or *Commedia Dell Arte*.

*Commedia Dell Arte* will fascinate children. Meaning ‘*The Art of Comedy*,’ this form of theatre began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and brought together stock characters in comic situations. Some typical characters you could introduce to the children include:



Image: Commedia Dell' Arte Character Masks, Kartaruga.

- *Arlecchino*, a comic servant
- *Scaramouche*, an adventurer or officer figure
- *Pantalone*, a miser
- *Pierrot*, an innocent or fool
- *Pulcinella*, a violent man (a precursor of Punch)

Carnival masks include characters such as:

- *Gatto* – the cat
- The Jester
- *Dottore Peste* – a plague doctor
- *Moretta* – a mask representing female beauty
- *Volto* – the citizen mask



Image: Traditional Jester.

**For further images see the web links in the RESOURCES section of these plans.**

## The Papier-mâché Technique.

In the RESOURCES section, you will find links to a series of short film clips which provide a useful introduction to the Venetian papier-mâché technique. The first film demonstrates the traditional way of creating a face mold, while the following three-part film shows how the papier-mâché is applied, followed by different painting and decorating techniques on a wide variety of mask designs.



Image: A handpainted traditional Venetian mask, Laura Morelli.

After watching these films, your class will be ready to start the first practical part of their project!

## **PRACTICAL ACTIVITY – Creating a mask armature and adding a papier-mâché layer.**



Materials needed:

- Strong Latex Balloons
- 50:50 PVA glue/water mix
- Newspaper, ripped (not cut) into short strips
- Clothes Pegs
- Water pots (for stands)

For obvious reasons we can't make traditional face molds, so for this project the children will use balloons as the armature for their mask. (An armature is the structure underneath a sculpture that gives it its frame or shape). Look for 'strong latex' balloons – less chance of popping! One balloon will make two masks, so children can work in pairs, one balloon between them. This will also speed up the process.

- Blow up the balloon so that it is roughly the size of the child's head. Knot the end.

**HANDY HINT:** Attach a peg or two to the knot to give the balloon weight. It can then sit in a water pot, making it easier for the children to papier-mâché without having to hold it.



- Paste recipes differ. Some people suggest using flour and water or wallpaper paste for papier-mâché. Please note that wallpaper paste is not recommended for use with children due to antifungal chemicals. A mixture of PVA and water is just as effective. Allow approximately 1 part glue to 1 part water and mix thoroughly.
- Children should glue strips of newspaper to their balloon armature, being extra careful with this first layer not to pop the balloon. Roughly torn newspaper strips join better than cut pieces. Press the newspaper strips so that they lie smooth - children may find it easier to use fingers than a brush. Cover the entire balloon, leaving only a small gap at the bottom for the knot. You want to aim to complete one layer in this session.
- Leave to dry.





## SESSION 2 – ADDING FURTHER PAPIER-MACHE LAYERS (Approx 1.5 – 2 hrs)

This session is all about building up your layers of papier-mâché.

It might seem dull, but don't skip this step – it's essential! For your mask to be effective, your papier-mâché must be strong. For this reason, it is recommended that each balloon has **A MINIMUM of THREE LAYERS OF PAPIER-MACHE.**

Of course if you can, do more! It will only strengthen your mask. If you don't have enough layers, when you pop your balloon your mask may collapse. It can be tricky for children to figure out how many layers they have done, so do allow a decent amount of time for this session. Some children may make faster progress than others – get them to help each other as a team effort.

### **HANDY TIP:**

At the end of this session, pour any remaining glue mixture over the balloons and get children to spread it over their balloon with their fingers so that the surface is smooth with no paper sticking up. A smooth surface to your mask will make painting and decorating easier.

- Leave your balloons somewhere safe and warm to dry.

## SESSION 3: DESIGN DEVELOPMENT (1 hr) and MASK CUSTOMISATION (1 hr)

You'll need:

- Face template (see RESOURCES)
- Pencils and pencil crayons
- Medium thick cardboard/ e.g. cereal packets
- Scissors
- Craft knife
- Glue gun
- Optional – Papier-mâché mulch



Your balloons need to be **completely dry** before you can start to customise them into masks. This session could therefore be split into two, with children working on their design development while they wait for their balloons to dry.

### Designing your mask

As you will have seen from looking at Venetian carnival masks, they come in many different shapes, sizes and colours, with a huge range of designs and great variety in the materials used to decorate them.

Give children the face template from the RESOURCES section and ask them to think about the character they want to create. Maybe they'd like to replicate a traditional Commedia dell Arte character, but put their own spin on it. Do they want to create a half mask or full mask? How will the mask be worn – with ribbon or elastic around the head, or held with a rod? Will their mask represent an animal, a human, or something else altogether? Perhaps the two families - the *Montagues* and the *Capulets* - could share a design theme to show their respective loyalties?

- Let children spend some time working on their drawing, adding colour and making notes about materials.



### Customising the mask.

The papier-mâché on the balloon should be bone dry before you start this stage. First, pop the balloon. If it doesn't immediately come out of the papier-mâché shell, don't force it. You want your papier-mâché to retain its shape and you can peel the balloon away during the next stage.



Now, cut your papier-mâché shell into two halves, as the picture shows. If your design is for a half mask, draw the shape on your mask shell and cut out carefully.



### Cutting eyeholes.

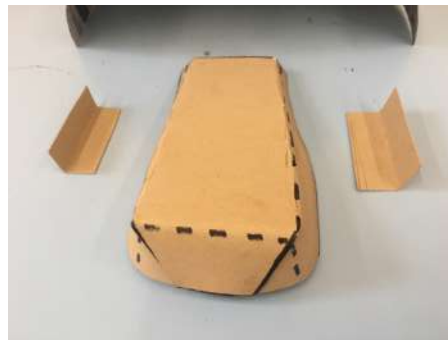
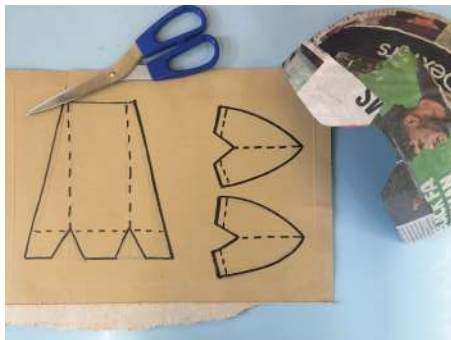
A nice trick for getting the eyes in the right place is to hold an A4 piece of paper to your face and make indents where your eyes are. Draw these on the paper and cut out with scissors. Now you can use your paper as a stencil on the mask. Use your discretion as to whether children are able to use a craft knife for this job. Adults should either supervise this or cut the eyeholes themselves.



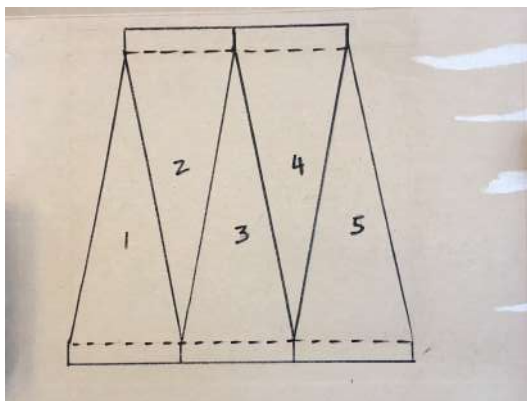
### Adding appendages

Depending on the character they have chosen, children may want to add details such as noses, ears, or other features. These can be made out of medium-thick cardboard – like the type used in cereal packets. You will find templates for making long noses, animal snouts, ears, and a jester headdress in the Resources section – or let children to design their own using the templates as a guide.

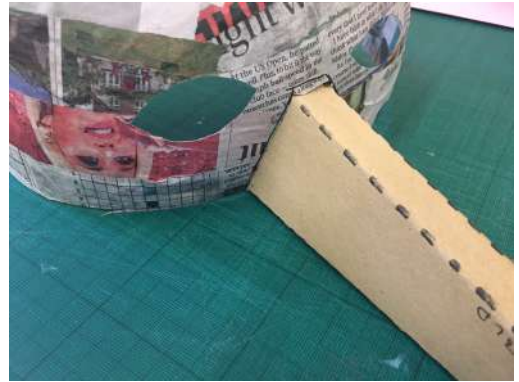
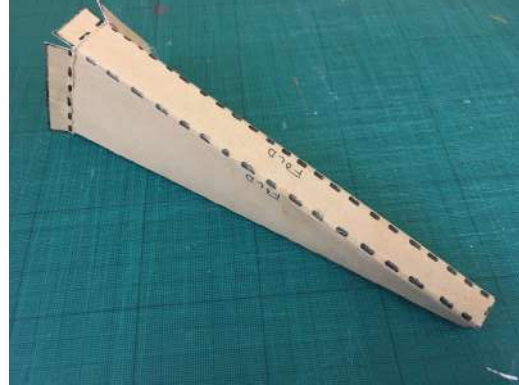
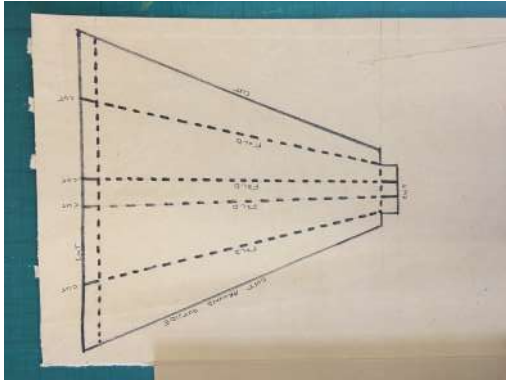
Follow the instructions on the templates to fold and glue your ears, noses, etc. Fix these to your mask with a glue gun, for maximum strength. Again, supervise children carefully, or allow an adult to do this.



Images L-R: Template for snout and ears; Snout constructed with card folds to attach; Snout and ears attached to mask.



Images L-R: Template for jester headdress; Headdress glued to mask.



Images Top L-R: Template for nose; Nose constructed; Bottom L-R: Cut insert in mask for nose; Attach nose securely with glue gun.

### Optional – Mulch Details

It can be fun to add textured details such as eyebrows and beards to your mask if you have time. For this, you need to make papier-mâché mulch. Ideally mulch should be made the day before and left overnight, but it still works fairly well if prepared in the morning for use in the afternoon.

To make mulch, rip tiny pieces of newspaper and leave submerged for a few hours in a bowl with the 50:50 PVA and water mix. When it's ready, you'll be able to pick up the mulched paper and mold it into the desired shape on the mask. It's a messy process and risks making your mask wet, which is not ideal – so children should work carefully. The mulch details must be thoroughly dry before the painting stage so allow time for this. When dry, it will be rock solid.



Images L-R: Mulch mixture; Mulch beard, nose and eyebrows on Jester.

## SESSION 4: PAINTING THE MASK (approx. 1.5 hours)



You'll need:

- Acrylic paint – white plus a range of colours
- Thick and thin paintbrushes

In this session, the masks will start to come alive!

Depending on the time available, it can be useful to start by painting the entire mask with a white acrylic paint primer. This is not essential but can help to see the mask as a whole, and also means that colours painted on top will be more vibrant.

**HANDY HINT:** Avoid using poster paint. The water in poster paint will soak into your mask, making the shape collapse. Acrylic paint is ideal because it dries quickly. Encourage the children to put it on thinly without adding water and build it up in layers, referring back to their drawings for pattern and detail.

**HANDY HINT:** If you need to rest your mask on something, to help it retain its shape, screw up some newspaper and put it underneath as a 'cushion'.

## SESSION 5: FINISHING TOUCHES AND EVALUATION (Approx 1.5 hours)

You'll need:

- Acrylic paint – metallics and bright colours
- Unusual decorative materials, e.g. sequins, feathers, wool, fabric etc.
- Elastic, ribbon or rods for attaching to masks.



The final session is for adding finishing touches to your masks. If you're planning to display your masks or use them in your performance, think about what will make them stand out. Metallic details will pick up the light. Perhaps you have craft materials like feathers or sequins that can be glued to make patterns. Finally, staple elastic or ribbon to the mask and check that it is secure when worn. Half masks look effective attached to hand-held rods, which can also be decorated by the children.

- Evaluate your masks, making changes and improvements as necessary.





Images: Finished Masks

On the following pages please find resources to support the sessions.

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## **RESOURCES**

### **SESSION 1**

**These websites may be useful for initial research and images:**

<https://masksoftheworld.com>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/mask-face-covering/Theatrical-uses>

[https://costumes.lovetoknow.com/Theatre\\_Masks](https://costumes.lovetoknow.com/Theatre_Masks)

<https://www.the-noh.com/en/world/mask.html>

<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/a-punchdrunk-approach-to-making-theatre>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummers%27\\_play](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummers%27_play)

**For images of traditional Venetian masks:**

<http://magicofvenezia.com/history-of-venetian-masks/>

[https://www.simplymasquerade.co.uk/page\\_2931797.html](https://www.simplymasquerade.co.uk/page_2931797.html)

<https://theculturetrip.com/europe/italy/articles/a-guide-to-the-masks-of-venice/>

**Films showing the papier-mâché mask making process:**

Making a face mold:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EddJ2Vik3QE>

Part 1. Applying paper to the mask:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_m7zayBxnv0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_m7zayBxnv0)

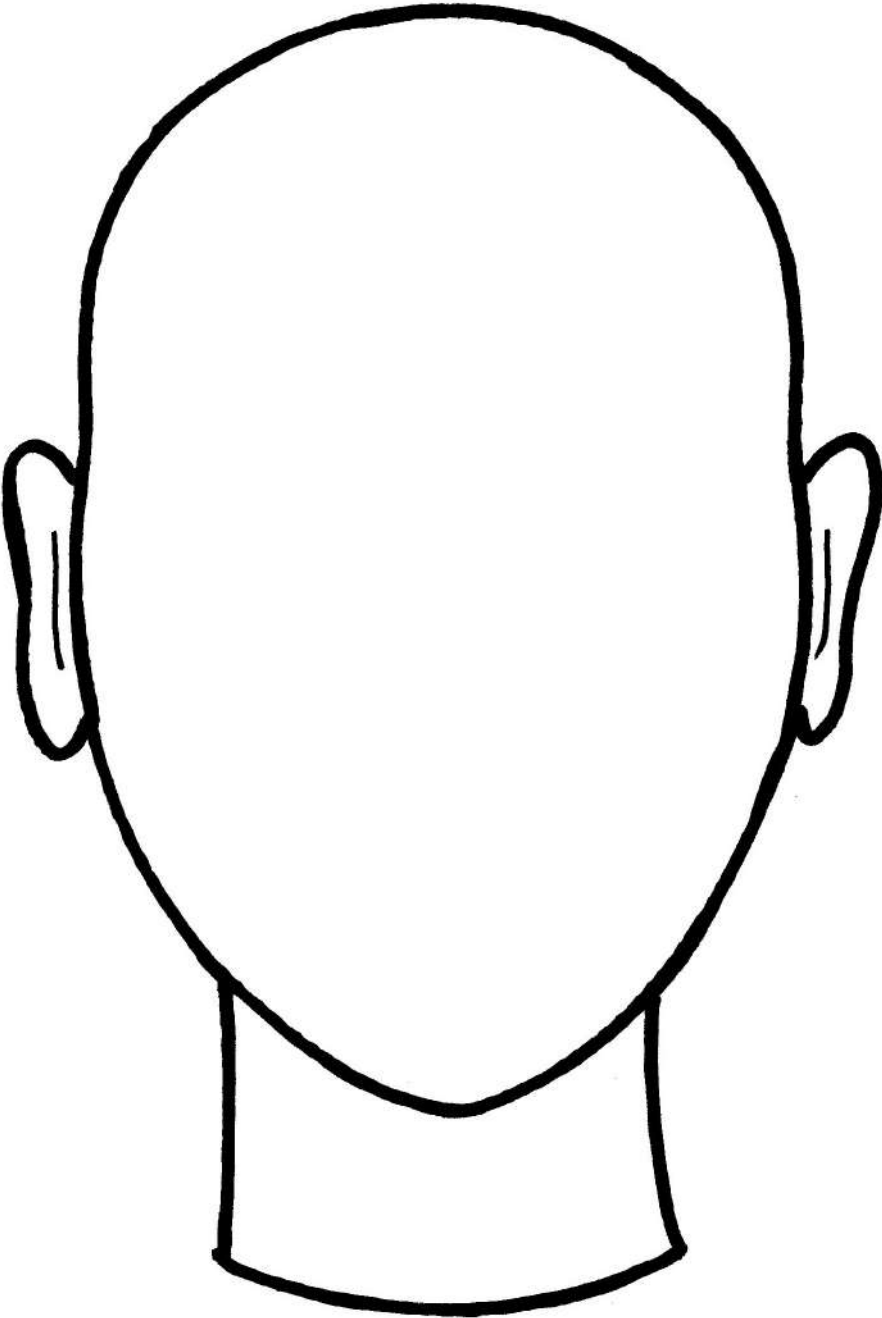
Part 2 – Painting techniques for different mask shapes:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXXPyrP0Yyl>

Part 3 – Ambitious decoration and Unusual Masks:

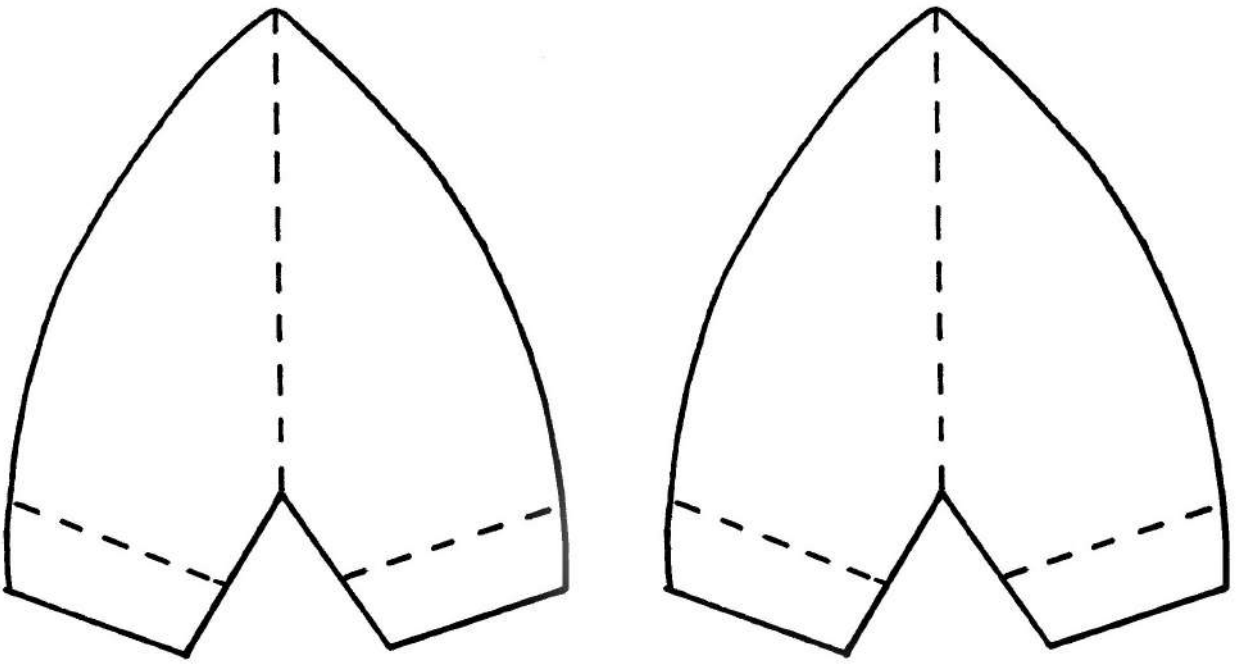
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uS5QHPwOow>

Session 3: Face Template for Design Development

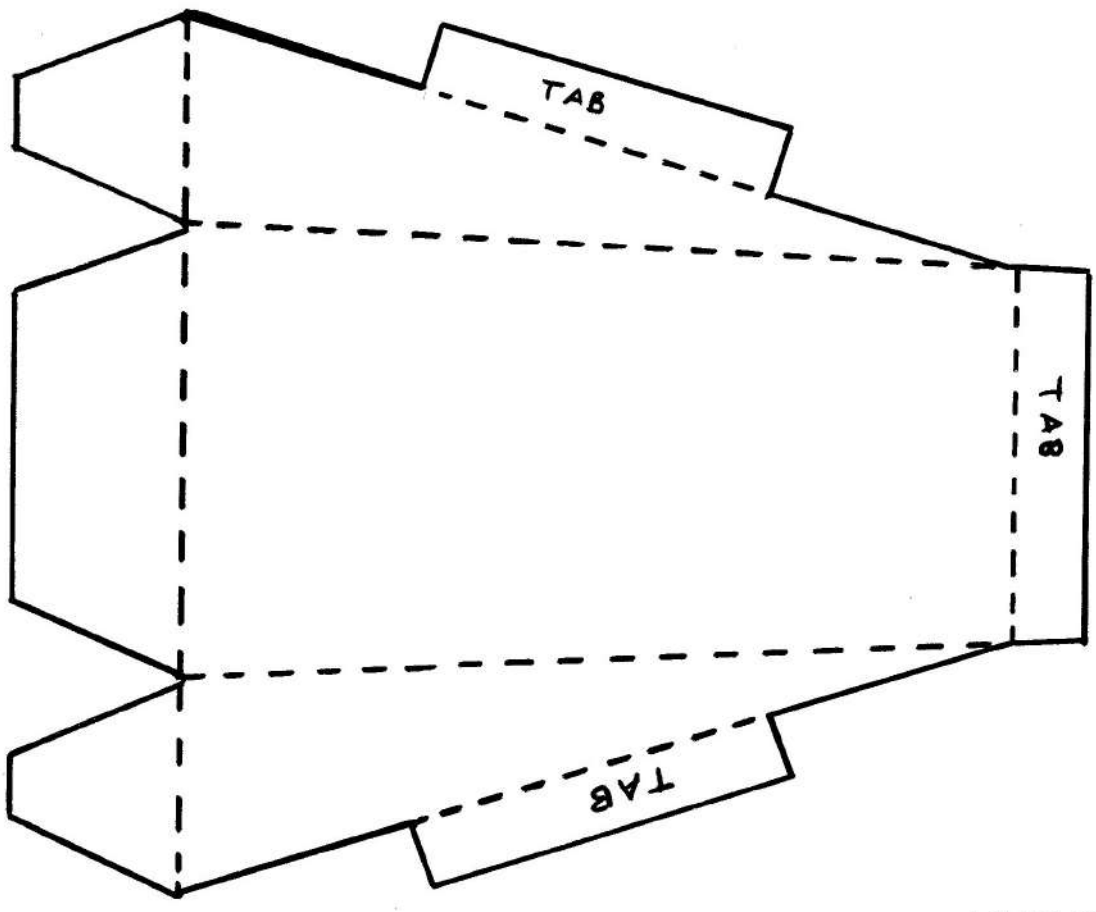




Session 3: Template for Ears and Snout



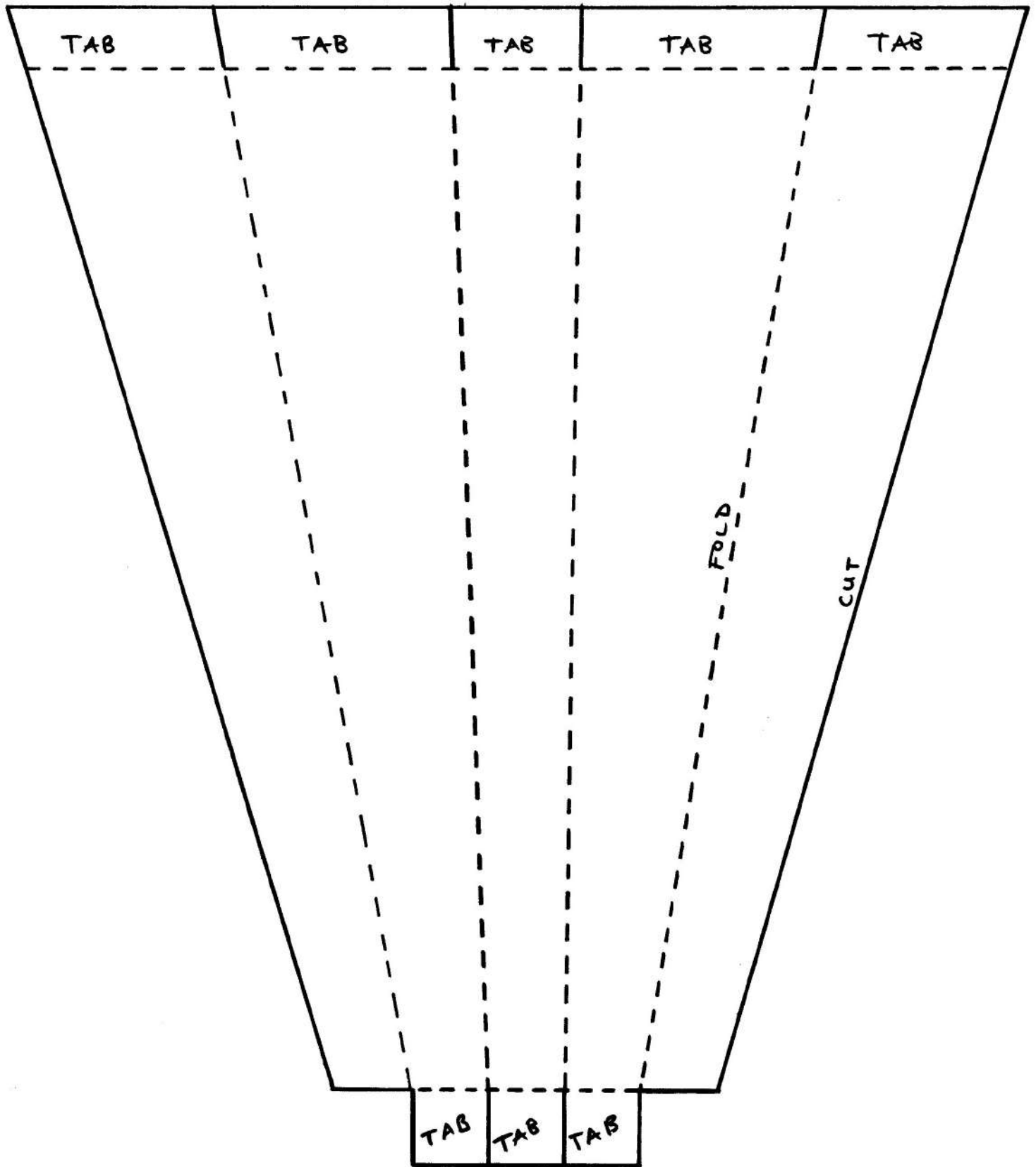
EARS



SNOUT

--- FOLD  
— CUT

Session 3: Template for long nose



--- FOLD  
— CUT

Session 3: Template for Jester Headdress

--- FOLD  
— CUT

