

# ASTRONAUT GROUP 1

THE STORY OF THE ORIGINAL MERCURY SEVEN ASTRONAUTS



## Classroom Study Guide

Table of Contents

Hello from Griffin Theatre!

We are thrilled that you have chosen to make *Astronaut Group 1* a part of your classroom this year. This guide has been designed to extend your students’ experience of our production and make it a more meaningful and educational adventure for everyone involved.

Who is Griffin Theatre .....	3	The Chosen Seven .....	6-7
Going to the Theatre/Etiquette.....	4	Photographs .....	8-9
Introduction/Background.....	5	Discussion Questions .....	10-11



## Who is Griffin Theatre?

The mission of the Griffin Theatre Company is to create extraordinary and meaningful theatrical experiences for both children and adults by building bridges of understanding between generations that instill in its audience an appreciation of the performing arts. Through artistic collaboration, the Griffin Theatre Company produces literary adaptations, original work and classic plays that challenge and inspire with wit, style and compassion for the audience.

### OTHER TOURING PRODUCTIONS

#### IN TO AMERICA

by William Massolia

Directed by Dorothy Milne

The American immigrant experience traced from Jamestown to present day through the stories of ordinary men, women and children who departed their homelands in the hopes of creating a new life.

*For grades 6 - 12*



#### FRINDLE

Based on the book by Andrew Clements Adapted by William Massolia

Some people might say that Nicholas Allen is a maverick. But his new language arts teacher, the notorious Mrs. Granger, thinks he's a hooligan. Things spiral out of control when Nick's simple class prank turns into a nationwide phenomenon.

*For grades K - 5*



#### LETTERS HOME

Inspired by the *New York Times* article "The Things They Wrote" and the HBO Documentary *Last Letters Home*, Written and Directed by William Massolia

War letters are by their nature incredibly powerful and personal expressions of love and friendship from service men and women in combat to their loved ones at home. *Letters Home*, without politicizing, gives audiences a powerful portrait of the soldier experience in the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq.

*For grades 6 - 12*



Before attending the play, please review the following tips with your students to ensure an enjoyable experience for everyone at the theatre.

### **DON'T:**

- Put your feet up on the seat in front of you or kick the chair in front of you.
- Take pictures during the play: this is really distracting for the actors.
- Talk to the people next to you during the play.
- Get up and move around during the play.



### **DO:**

- Laugh when the play is funny.
- Be attentive to the actors.
- Applaud during the play.
- Applaud when the play is over.
- Arrive to the theatre on time.
- Use the restroom before the play starts.
- Turn all electronics off before the play starts.
- Have fun!

# Introduction

The Mercury Seven astronauts, also known as the Original Seven, were the first group of American astronauts selected by NASA for the United States' inaugural human spaceflight program, Project Mercury. These seven men became national heroes and paved the way for future space exploration. The Griffin Theatre production and this guide will introduce you to each of these pioneering astronauts and their contributions to the Mercury program. In many ways the chosen Astronauts, their wives and families were the “first” reality television celebrities.



## BACKGROUND

In the late 1950s, the United States was determined to compete with the Soviet Union in the space race. NASA initiated Project Mercury with the goal of sending a human into space and safely returning them to Earth. To find the right candidates, NASA screened military test pilots who met strict criteria for physical fitness, psychological stability, and technical proficiency.

## THE CHOSEN SEVEN

Out of over 500 candidates, seven men were selected on April 9, 1959. These men would become the face of America's space program and symbols of bravery and exploration.

# The Mercury Seven



## Alan B. Shepard Jr.

**Background:** Navy Test Pilot

**Notable Mission:** Mercury-Redstone 3 (Freedom 7)

**Significance:** On May 5, 1961, Alan Shepard became the first American in space with a suborbital flight aboard Freedom 7. His 15-minute flight demonstrated that the United States could send humans into space and safely return them.



## Virgil "Gus" Grissom

**Background:** Air Force Test Pilot

**Notable Mission:** Mercury-Redstone 4 (Liberty Bell 7)

**Significance:** On July 21, 1961, Gus Grissom became the second American in space. Despite the mission's success, his capsule sank after splashdown due to a premature hatch detonation. Grissom later commanded the first Gemini mission and was tragically killed in the Apollo 1 fire.



## John H. Glenn Jr.

**Background:** Marine Corps Test Pilot

**Notable Mission:** Mercury-Atlas 6 (Friendship 7)

**Significance:** On February 20, 1962, John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth, completing three orbits aboard Friendship 7. His successful mission was a significant milestone in the space race and boosted American morale. Glenn later became a U.S. Senator and returned to space aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery in 1998.



## M. Scott Carpenter

**Background:** Navy Test Pilot

**Notable Mission:** Mercury-Atlas 7 (Aurora 7)

**Significance:** On May 24, 1962, Scott Carpenter orbited the Earth three times aboard Aurora 7. Despite some technical issues and a slightly off-target splashdown, his mission provided valuable data for future flights. Carpenter later participated in underwater research and exploration.

## The Mercury Seven

---



### Walter M. Schirra Jr.

**Background:** Navy Test Pilot

**Notable Mission:** Mercury-Atlas 8 (Sigma 7)

**Significance:** On October 3, 1962, Wally Schirra orbited the Earth six times aboard Sigma 7. His mission focused on engineering tests and demonstrated the spacecraft's capabilities. Schirra is the only astronaut to fly in the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs.



### L. Gordon Cooper Jr.

**Background:** Air Force Test Pilot

**Notable Mission:** Mercury-Atlas 9 (Faith 7)

**Significance:** On May 15-16, 1963, Gordon Cooper completed 22 orbits aboard Faith 7, making him the first American to spend more than a day in space. His mission tested the effects of prolonged spaceflight on the human body and spacecraft systems



### Donald K. "Deke" Slayton

**Background:** Air Force Test Pilot

**Notable Mission:** Apollo-Soyuz Test Project

**Significance:** Deke Slayton was originally grounded due to a medical condition and did not fly during the Mercury program. However, he played a crucial role as NASA's Director of Flight Crew Operations, selecting and training astronauts. Slayton eventually flew in space as part of the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project in 1975, marking the first international human spaceflight mission.



## Photographs



The Mercury 7 astronauts were instrumental in the development of the G-force seat design used in the Mercury spacecraft, which was specifically designed to help them withstand the extreme G-forces experienced during launch and re-entry into Earth's atmosphere; essentially, their feedback and testing helped shape the seat's design to optimize their comfort and safety during high-G maneuvers.



Project Mercury astronauts inspect Mercury model.



President John F. Kennedy congratulating the astronaut Scott Carpenter in the Oval Office at the White House after his three-orbit flight around Earth. With them are Carpenter's wife at the time, Rene, and their children.

## Photographs



Mathematician Katherine Johnson at NASA in 1966.



The wives of the Mercury astronauts entertaining, Virginia, 1959. From lower left: Rene Carpenter, Annie Glenn, Jo Schirra, Betty Grissom, Marge Slayton and Trudy Cooper.



The wives watch Alan Shepard's blast off.

## Discussion Questions

---

1. The Space Race took place during the Cold War, a period of history marked by a strong, hostile rivalry between the United States and Russia. What impact did the early Russian space launches have on America?
2. Sputnik was launched in 1957. What does “sputnik” mean? Do you think it’s an accurate name?
3. What was aboard Sputnik 2 that alarmed the Americans? Why?
4. What was the main goal of Project Mercury? Do you think it would have happened without the Cold War. How close was the Space Race?
5. Why was Mercury chosen for the name of the manned space flight mission?
6. What were some of the reasons why the men in Astronaut Group 1 chose to participate in this project?
7. The wives of the astronauts were thrown into the limelight during this time. Describe some of the ways the wives were expected to behave. Do you feel these expectations were fair?
8. What were some of the ways the wives coped during this very stressful time? How might they react today?
9. Betty Grissom said that she didn’t go to college, but she had a PHT. What did that stand for? Do you think she or the other wives got the credit they deserved?
10. What gift did Gus Grissom give to Alan Shepard before his flight. What does this tell you about their relationship? What are some other examples of humor being used in the play. How can humor help in stressful situations?
11. Grissom’s flight had some harrowing moments, and the capsule was lost. What political and personal ramifications did that have on the Grissom family?
12. Who was Katherine Johnson? Describe her importance in John Glenn’s flight. How did she handle being called “the girl.” Would you consider her an unsung hero?
13. What unfortunate condition kept Slayton from flying a mission? How did he react in the moment and then later on? What does that say about his character?
14. The men and women of the play are considered pioneers in many ways. Gus Grissom said that he thought the project was “a chance for immortality.” Do you agree with him?
15. What do you think the next pioneers will explore?

## Additional Questions for Educators

---

1. *Astronaut Group 1* only covers the first four flights of Project Mercury. How many total flights were in the Mercury 7 Project during what time period?  
(Six manned missions from 1961-1963. The project lasted from 1958-1963.)
2. Name the Mercury 7 astronauts.  
(Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton.)
3. What was the previous name of NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration)?  
(National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, NACA)
4. Why did they change the name?  
(Since the agency would also include space exploration, President Eisenhower decided to create NASA, with the word space in the name, and have it absorb NACA.)
5. Where were the missions launched?  
(Cape Canaveral, Florida)
6. The Mercury 7 debuted a new profession in the United States: astronauts. What is the origin of the term astronaut?  
(In Greek legend, argonauts were searching for the Golden Fleece. The term aeronaut referred to travelers in hot air balloons or other flying aircraft. The Space Task Group brainstormed and thought that they coined the word “astronaut” which means star traveler. They later learned that term had been used in science fiction since the 1920s.)
7. What was significant about the third flight of Project Mercury?  
(John Glenn was the first man to orbit the earth. The first two flights were suborbital: they went into space and back, but did not orbit the earth.)
8. How were each of the capsules named?  
(Each of the astronauts chose a name for the capsule he flew in. Each name included the number 7, for the 7 original astronauts. The names were Freedom 7, Liberty Bell 7, Friendship 7, Aurora 7, Sigma 7, Faith 7)

*Sources: [nasa.gov/project-mercury](https://nasa.gov/project-mercury), and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercury\\_7\\_Project](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercury_7_Project)*