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Paul Lewis
Boston College

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How Many Students Does it Take to Write a Joke? Humor Writing in Composition Courses

Cover Page Footnote

Paul Lewis is professor of English at Boston College and author of *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (SUNY Press, 1989).

How Many Students Does it Take to Write a Joke?

Humor Writing in Composition Courses

Paul Lewis

As writing teachers we have serious objectives. In a limited number of weeks we want our students to feel more comfortable with the writing process, more aware of language, more flexible in the way they engage ideas, and more attentive to audience. Insofar as humor depends on unusual combinations of ideas, insofar as it hinges on unexpected meanings and associations of words and phrases, insofar as it both reveals and conceals values and triggers instantaneous responses (laughter, groaning)—it can advance these pedagogical goals. Given the widely shared interest in comedy among our students—a generation that grew up on sitcoms, standup routines, and infinitely recycled jokes—the wonder is that humor writing is not common in composition courses.

Indeed, if composition pedagogy were rooted in student interest, every first-year course and advanced writing elective would include humor writing. Ask our students whom they admire more—John McPhee or Jim Carrey, Annie Dillard or Dana Carvey. And, even after we have explained who McPhee and Dillard are, most will not hesitate in choosing Carrey and Carvey. Still, rather than tapping into this energy, many English instructors tend to regard it as part of the problem—a sign of poor taste or cultural poverty—or simply as a matter that is irrelevant to academic writing. Perversely, many writing teachers behave like the unsympathetic potential lovers in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). Noting a pun or witticism in a student paper, these chilly evaluators pause only long enough to jot a question in the margin: "Pun intended?" or "Are you trying to be funny?"

Similarly, humor is ignored, discouraged, or barely tolerated in many composition texts and in much scholarship in the field. A survey of current texts reveals a seriousness of tone, a style characterized by projective and vigorous determination. Texts such as *Writing as Thinking* and *Writing in the Disciplines, Strategies: A Rhetoric and Reader* have no heading for humor in their indexes. No wonder this is so, since their titles appear to announce military campaigns or profound philosophic inquiries that, however unintentionally, bring the macho lumberjacks of the Monty Python sketch or Jack Handey of Saturday Night Live's Deep Thoughts gag to mind. In the same way, the text, *Rhetoric and Style: Strategies for Advanced Writers* seems to assume that advanced writers do not need to work on humor, while *Writing as Revelation* suggests by way of omission

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that one can reach the promised land of prose style without laboring in the fields of wit.

Some writing texts that do discuss humor tend toward the perfunctory by implying that using it may not always be a bad idea.¹ In *The Riverside Guide to Writing*, for instance, D. Hunt (1991) concedes that humor helps engage readers but notes that “in public discourse, every departure from . . . [an] earnest, distant, deferential tone is risky” (p. 523). Similarly, *The Writing Process* (Lannon, 1992) offers a couple of pages under the heading, “Inserting Humor Where Appropriate,” in which the author observes that “a bit of humor can rescue an argument that might otherwise cause hard feelings” (p. 373). What would the Church Lady say about so guarded a license to amuse: “Isn’t that special?”

This grudging acceptance of humor is unfortunate not only because it leaves a potential source of energy and enthusiasm untapped, but also because collaborative work on humor writing can provide opportunities for achieving objectives that are often seen as incompatible by composition theorists: writing as personal expression and writing as critical response to cultural and social conditioning. Describing the goal of getting beyond this expressivist/social constructivist dichotomy, Linda Flower (1989) has asked, “Can we . . . reconcile a commitment to nurturing a personal voice, individual purpose, or an inner, self-directed process of making meaning, with . . . the more recent assertions that inquiry in writing must start with social, cultural, or political awareness?” (p. 282).

To develop practices for such classroom reconciliations, we should bear in mind the profoundly personal and social qualities of shared amusement. As for this overlap, a century of social science humor research (Fine, 1983; Keith-Spiegel, 1972) has both confirmed and elaborated on the pioneering insights of Freud (1905/1963) and Bergson (1911). For the former, humor, like dreams, expresses repressed desires; for the latter, humor is a mechanism of social regulation of deviant behavior and thought. Because of this interplay, every written or recounted joke can tell us a good deal about its creator or teller: revealing the current state of his or her knowledge of the joke’s subject, his or her disposition to the norms, expectations, or cognitive patterns apparently violated in the joke, and her level of sophistication. In listening to jokes and critiquing them, each of us works through a set of values that we may or may not have been consciously aware of. Similarly, the act of writing a joke brings us to a charged intersection of social and individual motifs of identity—allowing for the possibility of self-encounter, a potentially expansive revisioning of the self.

In the flow of social dialogue, the implicit values of humor frequently operate too fleetingly to be observed. But in the writing classroom, we can slow down these exchanges, and—by making them topics for analysis—see how they come into (our) play. If students can become more aware of the values that inform their most spontaneous—that is, least restrained or comprehended—responses, they may be able to transfer this sensitivity to the other moods and tasks of prose composition.

¹A notable exception may be found in Lynn Z. Bloom’s *Fact and Artifact*; Chapter 7 Writing Humor, provides an introduction to comic purposes, structures, language, and forms. See also sections on humor in Collette and Johnson (1993) and Miller and Webb (1992).

Perhaps instructors are reluctant to include humor writing in composition courses because they suspect that humor creation cannot be taught or that, even if someone named Allen (Woody or Steve) might be able to do this, they certainly can't. While it is no doubt true that comic genius is as unteachable as any other miracle of human development, it is also true that we know enough about humor to guide students through the process of creating it. Cognitive and linguistic studies (Raskin, 1985; Suls, 1983) have confirmed the ancient view of a humorous text or stimulus as one that associates ideas or images usually considered separate. In this way puns rely on phonetic overlap to call attention to connections between, for instance, nakedness and pandas (barely linked) or prostitutes and hobos (both called tramps).

Studies of professional comedians (Fisher & Fisher, 1981; Fry & Allen, 1975; Janus, 1975) suggest that—as a result of unusual childhood relationships (with nonnurturing parents who insist that they grow up and stop acting like children)—many future comics are sensitized to incongruity (that is, a sense that no value or norm is absolute, no idea fixed) as a ruling principle of life. This mind set supports the comic's unconventionality: his or her willingness to play with words, question authority, doubt piety, and reject obvious truths. To the extent that our students should think for themselves, we need to consider having them spend a few weeks on assignments that shake up the ordinary arrangement of their ideas.

Reading and Writing Jokes: Word Play and Audience Response

Just as our students need to study logic to write stronger arguments, so they need to attend to the structure and functions of jokes to become humor creators. For this reason, students should be asked to read classic and contemporary works on humor and to engage in the simple ethnographic project of collecting a few (five or ten) jokes currently being told. One useful source for classic humor texts is John Morreall's anthology *The Philosophy of Humor and Laughter* (1987). The short sections in this anthology by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Kant, and Spencer clarify the structure of humorous texts, as should the chapter on humor by Jerry M. Suls (1983). Selections in the Morreall anthology from the work of Bergson, Freud, and Joseph Boskin, and readings from contemporary humor researchers—for instance, Alan Dundes (1987) on ethnic jokes, Gary Spenser (1989) on JAP-baiting jokes — also establish a basis for discussing how jokes operate.

Collecting current jokes allows writers to apply what they are reading to the present cultural and personal moment. It develops a set of texts and contexts for an analysis that asks why these texts are jokes (rather than serious narratives) and why they are circulating now. Discussion of the structural properties of jokes highlights the multiple meanings of words and phrases and, therefore, of the importance of the most precise and economical prose style. "Cut these words and they would bleed," Emerson said (as cited in Murray, 1968, p. 234), sounding grim enough about the need for care when editing serious texts. But comedians take an even dimmer view of revision, since they know that cutting or moving a single word in a joke can lead to hemorrhaging and death. Because people who cannot tell jokes effectively lack the sensitivity to language that writing cultivates, they miss just this point: that every word counts.

Analyzing and creating jokes, even cheesy puns, calls attention to the complexity and richness of language—of words and phrases—by bringing their range of potential meanings to consciousness. Linguistic comprehension requires a largely unconscious sorting out of significance, a quick selection of the point intended in an utterance or written text. Someone asks, “Are you feeling a little stiff today?” and you instantly infer from the context (you were stretching or groaning) that he is using the word *stiff* to inquire about your physical flexibility. A serious question requiring a serious response. But a humor creator approaches this language exchange with a more expansive set of possible meanings and objectives, as even a casual consideration of other associations of the word *stiff* can demonstrate.

Consider the waitress who complains about the fact that her boss often seats a corpse at one of her tables. “Every time they put him there,” she laments, “he stiffes me.” Although an obsessive interest in punning suggests a low level of humor creativity, raising awareness of the opportunities for joke writing inherent in multiple meanings (*stiff* and *stiffs*) slows down the process by which we move past alternative meanings to get the point. A rich prose style requires this higher order of awareness of the ways words and phrases resonate.

Student prose often seems unsophisticated because it lacks just such an appreciation of words chosen for the sharpest, most telling effects of both connotation and denotation. A sense of weakness in this area convinces too many novice writers to hunt for vocabulary in a thesaurus, to search for a fancy cousin of a word like *stiff* with no fear that their prose may sound unmoving, rigid, even dead. Writing humor can help students see that—just as no word related to *stiff* (for instance, stubborn, unbending, awkward, uncompromising, and tense)—can take its place in the punch line of the waitress joke. So there are no perfect synonyms. Every word has its own a cluster of associations.

To draw students to such associations, I have found that students writing jokes collaboratively in response to specific exercises helps reduce both their competence and performance anxieties. Creating jokes and comic sketches helps students see how they can succeed by slowing down the familiar but unconscious process that underpins spontaneously generated wit (teasing, punning, clowning). Just as memories that may inspire an autobiographical essay are always percolating into and out of consciousness, so jokes or joke fragments (perceived incongruities capable of being resolved) are often present in the mind. To the extent that creating humor tends to affect consciousness, it does so by making students more aware of such opportunities in ongoing thought.

Striving for spontaneity, I tend to design in-class exercises just before a class starts; for the same reason, I rarely use the same one more than once or twice. The point of generating jokes quickly is quantity not quality, silly puns being not only acceptable but also the most common. In the process of explaining the exercises, I provide examples both to demonstrate that at least a rudimentary joke can fit into a given format and to allow for groaning at my own expense that suggesting that anyone, even the instructor, can do this. Insofar as designing exercises is one of the delights of teaching humor writing, the examples below are offered as illustration:

- Write about an unusual marriage: either a description of the relationship or a brief conversation between the bride and groom.

Examples:

The Pope marries Mother Teresa. "Quite a sacrifice," he says.
"Oh, don't be such a martyr," she replies.

A cannibal canine marries a sadomasochistic feline.
"It's a perfect union in a dog-eat-dog world," he says."
I love it when you're vicious," she replies, lashing out with her
cat-o'-nine-tails.

The Little Mermaid marries Moby Dick, and they have whale of a
time under the sea.

- Pick a kind of fruit and write a joke about an unusual childhood experience it once had, like the grapes who always bunched up or the cherries who grew up thinking life was the pits.
- Think of an unusual restaurant and its name or main dish.

Examples:

Have you heard about the sadist who opened a Cajun restaurant?
The specialty of the house is blackened bluefish.

Have you heard about the new health food restaurant for masons?
It's called Grouts 'n Sprouts.

Writing jokes on demand requires students to take words and expand out from them into associated ideas and images. "Right," one student might say, "What do we know about grapes? That they live in clusters or bunches, are used in juice and wine, that they hang around." "And," another student might add, "there are raisins and jam and the expression 'sour grapes.'" In moments of discovery, jokes appear.

Another opportunity presented in both the reading and writing of jokes becomes clear when we think about how the word *stiff* popped up in jokes about John Wayne Bobbitt, the unfortunate husband who received anything but a stiff sentence for his role in severing his . . . marriage. That many people would be amused while many others would be repulsed by this joke (and by jokes about such figures as Michael Jackson, Jeffrey Dahmer, Hillary Clinton, or JonBenet Ramsey) calls attention to issues of audience response. Because it is easy for students to see how a joke can strike readers as inappropriate, differences in humor appreciation can be used to demonstrate what attending to audience response is all about.

Using contemporary jokes and humor controversies can help ground this

discussion in the present cultural moment. Were I using this approach today, I might call attention to jokes about such subjects as the O.J. Simpson civil case, President Bill Clinton and campaign fund raising, or AIDS treatment, all subjects in the news. Questions about audience and function would help shape class discussion. For example, if, as opinion polls suggest, views of O.J.'s innocence tend to correlate with racial and economic affiliation, would different O.J. jokes tend to appeal to different audiences? What do particular jokes assume in the way of information and values shared by tellers and listeners? How do particular jokes convey information, imply value judgments? How do they seek to define/construct their audiences? I would not expect composition students (or anyone else) to arrive at definitive answers to such questions. But I would expect that collecting and analyzing provocative jokes would sensitize them to the complex relations among writers, texts, and audiences.

By way of illustration, I might invite students to compare a joke told by President Ronald Reagan in the early days of the AIDS epidemic with jokes told recently by HIV-Positive Comedian Steve Morse (as cited in Richards, 1997). According to Kitty Kelley (1992), "Reagan enjoyed mimicking homosexuals" and telling jokes about AIDS victims:

He loved to tell the one about two doctors at the medical convention talking about treating AIDS patients. . . . One doctor said to the other: "I've got the solution. I serve them a special dinner of crepes and filet of sole." "What does that do? It's not a cure." "No it's not," said the doctor, "but the advantage is that I can just slide it under the door, and I don't have to touch them." (p. 497)

It is instructive to contrast this joke, told at a time when a conservative administration was keeping the disease at a distance and resisting the idea of mounting a program of AIDS education, with the kinds of jokes Morse tells:

Notice how there's always a cure for AIDS? Did you hear about the one that says you drink peroxide? It oxidizes your blood and kills the virus. And it's only 99 cents. That was the cure two years ago. Well, I drank that [expletive] for two months. My T-cells didn't go up, but my hair looked fabulous! . . . People are always saying, 'I can't believe you've been exposed to the AIDS virus. You've never looked better.' I figure, hell, pretty soon, I'll be drop-dead gorgeous." (Richards, 1997)

Unlike the doctor/dinner joke that laughs about trying to avoid AIDS patients, Morse's jokes humanize them by helping us glimpse their experience or point of view. Different purposes, different audiences.

The study of jokes both as texts and as social and psychological events draws students' attention to the critical (but often difficult to perceive and understand) relation between writer and reader (teller and audience; individual and society; culture and sub-groups). Readings on such theory and research as Morreall (1987), J. H. Goldstein and P. E. McGhee (1983) and P. E. McGhee (1979) can help

prepare instructors to discuss the varied functions of humor: from instruction to ridicule, anxiety reducing to hostility, venting, nurturing to attack. Seeing this very range of functions not only of different jokes but also of the same joke when told in varying situations can heighten student awareness to the subtleties writers should bring to their work.

The study of humor controversies—of outraged readers and outrageous jokes—can also sensitize student writers to the need for not only intelligence but also clarity and generosity in their responses to writing. Just as humor can be nurturing or threatening (Norman Cousins versus Freddy Krueger), so student writers should learn that what they say to someone else matters in many situations no more than how they say it. I want students to bring this enhanced appreciation of audiences not only to the humor but to everything they write—and to the tone they use in responding to the work of others.

Writing Skits and Parodies

Just as joke writing can heighten awareness of linguistic opportunities and audience response, so writing skits and parodies can lead students to greater subtlety in their treatment of ideas. Every skit is a pun more or less richly elaborated; every parody turns an established work or genre on its head. Ordinarily, like a British butler, we keep our ideas in order, neatly arranged: the impressionists were not dentists, the Spanish Inquisition no longer reigns, and so on. But to the humor writer the overlaying of these generally separated frames of reference has vast potential. If the impressionists had been dentists, then, as Woody Allen's Van Gogh writes, the following possibilities exist:

Toulouse-Lautrec is the saddest man in the world. He longs more than anything to be a great dentist, and he has real talent, but he's too short to reach his patients' mouths and too proud to stand on anything Meanwhile, my old friend Monet refuses to work on anything but very, very large mouths and Seurat, who is quite moody, has developed a method of cleaning one tooth at a time until he builds up what he calls "a full, fresh mouth." It has an architectural solidity to it, but is it dental work? (1972, pp. 201–202)

Writing these sentences required knowledge of both nineteenth-century European art and dentistry and the willingness to loosen up about these subjects. While we want our students to take their ideas seriously, at least some of the time, we also want them to expand the way they entertain thoughts and opinions: to consider that any view can be contradicted, that every idea needs to be tested by logic and evidence. And that they therefore should be willing to subject even—no, especially—their most firmly held convictions to reevaluation. What students need is not primarily the satirist's instinct for using wit to ridicule the views of others but the comedian's freely flowing sense that every idea in some context can seem absurd.

One of the most important benefits of humor—recognized in studies of comedy going back at least to Henri Bergson (1911), Northrup Frye (1957), and

C. L. Barber (1957)—is the temporary liberation it offers from habitual convictions. The business of classic comedy is the overthrowing of world views (as embodied in characters like Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) that seek to block new ideas or social relations. And what comedies do for audiences or characters, humor writing can do for our students. In working on such assignments, students can happily discover that not that everything is a joke but that they can expand emotionally and intellectually by playing with ideas, by asking the potentially hilarious *if* questions of comedy: if a man wore an ass's head, if a woman were attracted to another woman disguised as a man, if there were an unofficial cheer-leading squad that showed up to root for high school chess and swim teams—what comic potential could be tapped? And in the process how might we come to a more expansive view of serious topics concerning, for instance, power relations, gender politics, or social conformity? For example, we can ask students to:

- Take a literary character or film actor and place him or her in an unlikely alternative work. Then have the character tell the story from his or her point of view.

Examples:

Woody Allen as the Terminator

Beavis and Butt-head in a detective movie

Evita as a character in a slasher film.

- Pick a famous or infamous person and imagine that he or she has a syndicated advice column. Now write a few sample letters and responses.

Examples:

Ask Baron von Frankenstein

Dear Howard Stern

Tips from Prince Charles

- Write a comic skit and a TV commercial using the three randomly selected objects you were asked to bring to class. The skit should be set in a department store, classroom, or job interview. The commercial should have a satirical object like gerbil blush or Liz Taylor sandbags, perhaps because it targets foolish consumerism or unscrupulous advertising.
- Write parodic versions of a few college course descriptions, working to make fun of both the form they take and the academic topics they advertise and describe.

I save about fifteen minutes at the end of classes for exercises or presenting their work. As groups watch and listen, the room fills with laughter and applause.

At the end, groups compare notes and experiences. A student might say something like, "It was neat the way the first group worked with Evita as a psychopath by rewriting the lyrics for 'Don't Cry for Me, Argentina.'" Another student might return the compliment, saying, "Right, but your indecisive, self-doubting Woody Allen cyborg was hilarious."

Humor Projects

Given the generally high level of skepticism about humor in the profession, I hope that instructors intrigued by such humor writing will experiment with the kinds of exercises and assignments described above. To begin, one could take a day or week to look at humorous prose and work on a few in-class exercises. The enthusiasm of students will, I predict, stimulate greater efforts with this project.

If instructors decide to devote a bit more time to humor-writing, they can ask students to work outside of class, alone or in groups, to create more ambitious projects (longer skits or parodies) as homework for eventual presentation to the class. If students are allowed to pick their own subjects, we can expect a wide-ranging but energetic response to the task. In both first-year and advanced writing courses, some students have dealt with local or campus issues (for instance, "Reversal of Genders" [a skit based on the premise that female students in a dorm act and think like male students and vice versa] and "The Depths" [a parody of the Boston College student newspaper, *The Heights*]). Other projects have dealt with broader social, political, or psychological matters (e.g., "My Life as a Sock" [a skit narrated by a sock about the difficulties encountered in one day: rolling in the dryer, getting separated from its proper mate, and so on]; "Relaxing the Inner Nerd" [a parody of meditation tapes]; "Frankie Conatra: Politically Correct Lounge Singer"). Working together, students come to see that humorous prose is far from frivolous; they can use it to create vivid images, tell compelling stories, reach specific audiences, and advance ideas persuasively.

Or instructors might consider a bolder full-class collaborative project based on the model of Ken Kesey's fiction-writing course at the University of Oregon (Knox-Quinn, 1990) in which the students work with Kesey in and out of class on writing a novel. It would be interesting to pick a well known publication—the hometown newspaper or the college catalog, perhaps—and generate a parody of it. Just as Kesey works with the whole class on outlining chapters and then assigns sections to individuals, so too the class working on the catalog parody might divide it into small units and then assemble the whole together. Because parody-writing requires a thorough understanding of the rhetoric, purpose, and style of its target, the enterprise should begin with careful reading of the catalog with an eye toward seeing the way it conveys its ideas and impressions. Does the catalog ever discuss problems at the school? Does it honestly describe campus life? What is the comparative importance to the administration and alumni of academic and athletic programs? By highlighting the limitations of the target (and, more generally, the constraints of all writing), such questions draw attention to potential sources of parodic thrust.

Because humor is one of three primary responses to the incongruous or unexpected (the others being curiosity and fear) (Rothbart, 1976), humor is too

important to be merely inserted into writing. Far from being a matter only of style or ornamentation, humor rearranges ideas, conditions feelings, and provides perspective, distance, and detachment. It highlights contradictions, hypocrisy, false piety. It provides the rapier of satire, the pratfall of farce, the stunning deflation of mockery, the sudden rush and revelation of the well-delivered punch line. No attendant lord in the court of prose writing, humor is a peer to other luminous sources of energy: honesty, skepticism, conviction, intensity, and insight. It should, as Thoreau said of poverty, “be cultivated like a garden herb, like sage” in our students.

At the end of Woody Allen’s *Stardust Memories* (1980), Sandy Bates, the neurotic film director played by (and more than a little like) Allen, has a close encounter of the hilarious kind. Throughout the film, the depressed and beleaguered Bates flees from his numerous fans who function as a comic version of Eumenides—comic because their adoration of the famed *auteur* never prevents them from offering him the same advice: Stop making serious pictures. Go back to the mood of your early comedies. The extraterrestrials that Allen encounters offer the same wisdom, when they urge him to “tell funnier jokes.” Like the Allen character who literally runs away from humor, some writing instructors assume that labor and pleasure, serious purpose and comic mood, wisdom (or honesty or depth) and kidding are incompatible. These dichotomies are unfortunate, for, by tapping into students’ enthusiasm for humor, by helping them find comic themes and voices, we can help them become more flexible, joyful, and sensitive writers. ☺

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