

Humor Writing

ACTIVITIES FOR THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM



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Contents

PERMISSION ACKNOWLEDGMENTSxi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTSxiii

INTRODUCTIONxv

CHAPTER 1 Humorous Words, Phrases, and Sentences1

Humor Defined1

Language Humor3

 SLANG3

 JARGON4

 PORTMANTEAUS5

 PUNS7

 ORONYMS11

 MONDEGREENS12

 DAFFYNITIONS12

Grammar and Conventions Humor13

 METAPHORICAL VERBS13

 METAPHORICAL ADJECTIVES14

 METAPHORICAL ADVERBS14

 INCONGRUOUS WORD PAIRS15

 AMBIGUOUS PRONOUNS16

 MIXING DIRECT AND INDIRECT OBJECTS17

 MISPLACED MODIFIERS17

 MALAPROPS20

 TYPOS21

	<i>Jokes</i>	21
	THE RULE OF THREE	21
	REVERSALS	22
	MISDIRECTION	24
	NON SEQUITUR	25
	EXAGGERATION	26
	TOP TEN LISTS	28
	COMIC DEFINITIONS	29
	CAPTIONS	30
CHAPTER 2	Funny Stories and Essays	32
	<i>Elements of Humorous Stories</i>	33
	CHARACTERS	34
	CONFLICT	38
	PLOT	40
	POINT OF VIEW	43
	<i>Applying Humor Strategies</i>	45
	EXAGGERATION	47
	SLAPSTICK	49
	IRONY AND SARCASM	51
	<i>The Humorous Essay</i>	55
	CHOOSING A TOPIC	55
	INTRODUCTIONS	57
	BODY PARAGRAPHS	59
	CONCLUSIONS	60
	<i>Other Nonfiction Forms</i>	60
	THE Q & A	61
	THE LETTER	62
	THE DIARY OR JOURNAL	63
CHAPTER 3	Light Verse	65
	<i>Poetic Elements: A Comic Review</i>	65
	<i>Light Verse</i>	66
	<i>The Elements of Light Verse</i>	68
	ALLITERATION	68
	ONOMATOPOEIA	70
	METAPHOR AND SIMILE	71
	RHYME	78
	FEET AND METER	81
	A NOTE ABOUT TOPICS FOR POEMS	84

	<i>Forms for Light Verse</i>	85
	COUPLETS	85
	QUATRAINS	87
	CLERICHEWS	89
	HAIKU	90
	TANKA	91
	PSALMS AND SERMONS	91
	PORTMANTEAU POEMS	95
	SUMMARY POEMS	96
CHAPTER 4	Parody	98
	<i>Parody Defined</i>	99
	<i>Parody of Poetry</i>	102
	PARODIC QUOTATIONS	106
	PARODIC CONDENSATION	107
	PARODIC ADAPTATION	109
	<i>Parody of Fiction</i>	113
	AUTHOR'S STYLE	114
	CHARACTER VOICES	119
	CHARACTERS	121
	GENRE	123
	<i>Parody of Nonfiction</i>	126
	DAILY ITEMS	126
	FAMOUS DOCUMENTS	127
	NEWS	128
	ACADEMIC TEXTS	129
	HOW-TO ARTICLES	131
	"AUTHENTIC" ADOLESCENT NONFICTION	133
	WORKS CITED AND USEFUL TEACHER RESOURCES	135
	INDEX	143
	AUTHOR	151

Introduction

A person without a sense of humor is like a wagon without springs. It's jolted by every pebble on the road.

—*Henry Ward Beecher*

You can turn painful situations around through laughter. If you can find humor in anything, even poverty, you can survive it.

—*Bill Cosby*

In this time of high-stakes tests and school accountability, English classrooms have been pushed to become increasingly serious places. When combining No Child Left Behind (NCLB) pressures to improve basic reading and writing skills with our own desires to use literature and writing to do important cultural work—such as fighting ethnic, gender, and social class discrimination—humor is virtually banned from the classroom. In fact, when I talk with experienced and preservice teachers, there seems to be a palpable fear of using class time for “fun.” Mary Kay Morrison refers to this as *humorphobia* and lists its symptoms:

- Fear of not having time for humor because of accountability expectations.
- Fear of being perceived as silly, unproductive, an airhead, and unprofessional.
- Fear of losing “control” of the class or loss of discipline.
- Fear of inadequacy or inability to tell a joke coupled with inexperience in the use of humor.

- Fear of punishment or retaliation in an environment that is hostile or unaccustomed to humor.
- Fear of being made fun of or being the brunt of jokes. (72)

This phobia is unfortunate because humor can benefit teachers and students in many ways, from the personal to the educational.

For decades, medical studies have shown that humor and laughing lead to a host of positive health benefits, including improving respiration, circulation, the body's immune system, and pain tolerance, as well as reducing stress. Beyond the physiological benefits, humor can also contribute to mental health. Studies indicate that positive (as opposed to demeaning) humor can lead to a greater sense of well-being, perceptions of mastery and control, and a reduction in anxiety, depression, and anger (R. Martin 305). If we think about classroom management for a moment and consider the causes of many student disruptions—ones rooted in anger, anxiety, and low self-esteem—positive humor is in many ways a direct response to these problems. If we think about the general goal of helping students lead healthy lives, then we might consider psychologist Rod Martin's claim that a "sense of humor is an important component of overall mental health. People who are psychologically well-adjusted, with satisfying personal relationships, tend to use humor in ways that enhance their own well-being and closeness to others" (306).

Though on the surface these benefits seem beyond the purview of the English classroom, they are important nevertheless. We are used to the idea of cautioning students about the health problems related to such things as substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behaviors, and the like, because they have such obvious consequences. But in many ways, this approach is a bit like an insurance company that will pay for major medical crises but refuses to fund the kinds of wellness programs that might circumvent many of these problems in the first place. As the epigraphs of this introduction suggest, humor can be a healthy outlet that helps one cope with life struggles. In Sherman Alexie's young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the narrator says that he takes his drawing of humorous cartoons seriously because "I use them to understand the world. I use them to make fun of the world" (95). In a life filled with poverty, substance abuse, and the death of loved ones, he turns, at least in part, to humor for salvation.

But what does any of this have to do with teaching? Significantly, humor has many benefits specific to the classroom. When students are asked to list the most important characteristics of an effective teacher, having a sense of humor consistently ranks toward the top. This likely stems from a couple of side effects of humor. First, as Rod Martin explains,

The value of humor in the classroom may be particularly related to its role in promoting a sense of immediacy. Immediacy is an educational concept referring to the degree to which a teacher makes a close personal connection with students, as opposed to remaining distant and aloof. (353)

In other words, shared positive humor tends to create personal bonds between students and teacher, and between students of differing backgrounds. Or, as Claudia Cornett notes, “Laughter decreases social distance among people and causes a feeling of connectedness. Rapport is built by laughing together” (37).

This sense of immediacy leads directly to the second classroom benefit: a reduction in student anxiety. As researchers Neelam Kher, Susan Molstad, and Roberta Donahue point out, “By reducing anxiety, humor improves student receptiveness to alarming or difficult material, and ultimately has a positive affect [sic] on test performance” (401). When students feel personally connected to the teacher and to other students, they are more willing to take risks and engage with challenging material without being overly concerned with failure. In fact, some research shows that student performance increases by nearly 10 percent when teachers judiciously use humor (a few times per class) in a way specifically related to key points in the lesson (Ziv).

However, while these effects may be true for any content area, humor can play an even more central role in an English classroom. Young adults admire people with a humorous wit, just as they are attracted to comic media such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*, and to the performances of innumerable stand-up comedians. The popularity of many novels rests often in their use of humor—from slapstick in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series to the angry, ironic humor in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* to the self-deprecating humor of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. This is to say that while many aspects of the English curriculum may lack an appeal for certain students, humor almost always gets an enthusiastic reception. That’s important because, according to Cornett, student interest in particular reading material accounts “for 30 times the variance in reading success, and humor provokes interest. Potentially serious literacy problems can be addressed using a curriculum riddled with fun” (16).

And let’s remember that humor is nothing less than the careful and effective use of language. This is one of the reasons we value the work of humor writers from Mark Twain to J. D. Salinger to Alexie. Most humor relies heavily on figurative language and wordplay and involves linguistic problem solving, the natural arenas of the English classroom. In addition, in a school climate increasingly concerned with convergent thinking and finding the right answer, humor

challenges students to think divergently, creatively, and to welcome an array of possibilities (Nason).

Humor may also be an important component of differentiation in the English classroom. In his article “Humor: A Course Study for Gifted Learners,” Richard Shade argues that because much humor requires careful attention to and a deftness with language, gifted students are often particularly adept in the reading and production of humorous texts. He suggests that the close relationship between humor and creativity “allows an individual to ‘jump the track’ or ‘think outside the box’ more successfully” and to be more receptive to the kinds of risk taking that bright students need if they are to feel intellectually challenged (47). Similarly, because positive humor tends to relieve anxiety and build trust in the classroom, English language learning (ELL) educators such as Stephen Cary argue that it is helpful in establishing a classroom environment that invites language sharing and experimentation (77). Cary suggests that teachers working with ELL students should be

- encouraging more student jokes and funny stories;
- telling more jokes and funny stories themselves;
- increasing the number of humorous read-aloud books;
- sharing a daily cartoon or comic strip;
- sharing a daily humorous video clip. (78)

Given that one of the primary goals of the ELL classroom is to increase fluency, such sharing directly contributes to student progress.

All of which is to say that humor has a justified place in the English classroom. But don’t worry—this is not a book that will implore you to learn how to be funny, delivering appropriate one-liners at the right times (see Ronald Berk’s books for ideas on that approach). In fact, the only things *my* students usually find funny about me are my feeble attempts to be funny (“All right, class, for this next activity I’d like you to work in pairs, or apples if you’d prefer”). Rather, I’m suggesting making humor a part of the curriculum itself. In general, I try to intersperse activities in humor throughout my units, using them in part as a kind of comic relief for the serious work we do, but also for the specific skills that an exploration into humor can impart: skills in grammar and conventions, in voice and style, in figurative language, and in what I like to call *reading like a writer*. These activities provide students with a fun way to improve as readers and writers, and offer them the rare opportunity to express their humorous sides in an increasingly serious classroom space.

This book explores more than 150 activities that teachers might use to incorporate humor into the curriculum. It is divided into four chapters: (1) “Humorous Words, Phrases and Sentences,” (2) “Funny Stories and Essays,” (3) “Light Verse,” and (4) “Parody.” Within each chapter, I offer definitions, examples, and suggested activities.

Chapter 1 begins with a focus on what I call *language humor*, the building blocks of comic writing, and looks first at funny-sounding words, slang, portmanteaus, puns, oronyms, and daffynitions. The activities in this section provide students with an opportunity to explore the role that sound plays in our appreciation of language, as well as a chance to explore the figurative language we use to coin new words and describe our world in a new way. In looking at puns, students also are introduced to the fundamental elements of humor, such as incongruity and surprise. The second section of Chapter 1 examines humor connected to playful use of various parts of speech, odd syntax in word combinations, and errors in grammar and conventions. It starts with the ways verbs, adjectives, and adverbs can function metaphorically, and then shifts to a look at the ways such things as ambiguous pronouns, misplaced modifiers, and typos can intentionally and unintentionally create humorous sentences. The final section of this chapter examines jokes, with particular attention to a few of the common strategies that joke writers use, such as the rule of three, reversal, misdirection, exaggeration, lists, and definitions.

Humorous stories and essays are the focus of Chapter 2. I begin with a few building blocks—creating comic characters, conflicts, and plots—and then follow those with an exploration of how to apply such common narrative humor strategies as exaggeration, slapstick, and irony. The chapter ends with a look at the basic structure and strategies for comic essays and other potentially humorous nonfiction forms. More than the other chapters, this one takes a sequential approach much like a unit plan, beginning with prewriting strategies, and working through to drafting process, all focusing on helping students develop amusing material and story outlines.

Chapter 3 explores humorous poetry, starting with ways of introducing poetic elements such as metaphor, alliteration, and meter from a comic perspective. Along the way, I offer examples from some of the famous writers of light verse, from Ogden Nash and Dorothy Parker to Billy Collins. The chapter ends with an exploration of a variety of poetic forms that can be put to humorous use, including quatrains, haiku, clerihews, and more.

Because it examines parody, Chapter 4 incorporates aspects of the first three chapters. Beginning with an extended definition of the various forms and intentions that parody can take, the chapter moves through activities that focus on poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. In the process, students will explore how to

recognize a text, author, or genre's distinctive form and style; summarize a text and identify important or repeating ideas, images, and symbols; imitate in writing the form, style, or content of a text, genre, or author; and apply strategies of incongruity, reversal, misdirection, punning and wordplay, and exaggeration. The chapter ends with a focus on the parodying of forms common to everyday lives of secondary students—teen magazines, textbooks, exams, lunch menus, and the like.

There are two primary ways a teacher might want to use the activities in this book: (1) as discrete, five-to-ten-minute activities spread throughout the curriculum for comic relief, or (2) as a sequenced curriculum for a unit on humor writing. A teacher interested in the first approach might select from any of the activities in Chapter 1, as well as the final five poetry activities in Chapter 3 and the nonfiction activities in Chapter 4. For a teacher who would like to create a three-to-four-week humor writing unit, I recommend the following sequence:

Chapter 1

- The Rule of Three
- Reversals
- Misdirection
- Exaggeration

Chapter 2

- Extended Exaggeration
- Slapstick
- Irony and Sarcasm
- The Humorous Essay

Chapter 3

- Alliteration
- Onomatopoeia
- Metaphor and Simile
- Rhyme
- Feet and Meter
- Couplets
- Quatrains

Chapter 4

- Parody of Poetry
- Parodic Quotations
- Parodic Condensation
- Parodic Adaptation

If one has the luxury of more than a few weeks to dedicate to a unit on humor writing, then returning to writing funny stories in Chapter 2, and fiction and nonfiction parody in Chapter 4 could extend the unit. Regardless of whether the activities are taken piecemeal or as a sequence, the activities in this book are intended to provide a bit of comic relief in the classroom, to introduce students to the diverse and exciting field of humor studies, and to give them the rare opportunity to write in their own voices in a divergently creative way.

Regardless of which approach a teacher might take, a word of caution is in order. Because much humor intentionally transgresses boundaries and often uses people as the target of jokes, it presents a potential danger for the secondary English classroom. Students should not be making fun of each other, their teachers, staff, or administrators, no matter how well intentioned. This isn't to say that they cannot make fun of high school culture in general, or the stereotypes of adolescents and teachers with which they are all familiar. But I suggest the following rule:

No humor shared in class may target *specific* individuals in this school district, with the exception of your being allowed to make fun of yourself.

Throughout this book I make suggestions on how teachers might direct student humor toward more general or public targets. This is a fine line, however. For example, in Chapter 2 I discuss the drafting of a humorous essay about the general behavior of some boys at school dances. Although there is no specific target for this essay, it is possible that a few boys might be annoyed by it—but probably not as annoyed as when they are told to read *Paradise Lost*. The same thing is true in the selecting of humorous texts for reading purposes. The appropriateness of humor is a judgment call, one that you and your students will need to make.

Humorous Words, Phrases, and Sentences

A joke is not a thing, but a process, a trick you play on the listener's mind. You start him off toward a plausible goal, and then by a sudden twist you land him nowhere at all or just where he didn't expect to go.

—*Max Eastman*

Whatever is funny is subversive.

—*George Orwell*

Humor Defined

As the old saw goes, as soon as you try to explain humor, it's no longer funny. Or, as E. B. White said, "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." However, I have not come to bury humor, but to praise it, so we'll keep the definition short and the examples long. Although definitions of humor differ somewhat, depending on whether one approaches it from a psychological, anthropological, or literary perspective, most scholars agree that it is rooted in *expectation and surprise*.

By nature, human beings are pattern-seeking creatures. Consciously and subconsciously, we order our lives in ways that set up expectations. Each day I'll get up and make coffee, ride my scooter to work, teach, and then write. When I get home, my living room will be there with the couch under the big window, my teenage son slouching on it, book in hand, potato-chip crumbs sprinkled like snowflakes around him. I'll ask him, "How's it going?" He'll grunt. These things are a pattern—boring perhaps—but a pattern. And this pattern sets up expectations. We could express this mathematically in one of those "Which number comes next: 3, 6, 9, ___" problems, or logically in one of those "Which item doesn't

fit: mop, broom, vacuum, orange” questions. We see patterns everywhere, and these patterns set up continual expectations.

One of the fundamental aspects of humor is that it disrupts these expectations. It violates our logical perceptions of the normal. It generally does this through *incongruity*, which might be defined as the placing together of two or more things in a way that does not fit expectations. Such a break in the pattern generates surprise. If my coffee has a fish in it, if my scooter suddenly flies, if my son is vacuuming the living room, my daily pattern is broken, and I respond emotionally from the shock. If the surprise is humorous, I laugh. If it is annoying, I rant. If it is tragic, I cry.

Of course, if the surprise is annoying or tragic and it happens to someone else, then it may well be humorous to me. Or, as comedian Mel Brooks said “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.” This leads to another aspect of humor: it can be hostile. Whether playfully self-deprecating or virulently abusive, most humor has a *target*. Someone or something is the butt of the joke. If the target of the humor is someone, something, or some value representative of a disempowered group, and the joke is told by a representative of a group in power, then the humor is oppressive. America’s long tradition of racist and sexist jokes was (and continues to be) largely a means of psychologically justifying unjust treatment. If, on the other hand, the target is someone, something, or some value representative of a group in power, and the joke is told by someone disempowered, then the humor is subversive. Recent humor by female, gay, lesbian, and “ethnic” comedians often takes subversion as a primary tactic.

There is, as teachers well know, a danger here. It may be fine when the humor makes fun of cats, or Tom Cruise, or school lunches. But in a classroom, it may be altogether unacceptable (depending on the degree of hostility) when the humor attacks the school’s principal, an ethnic group, or a specific student in the class. Humor is powerful. For that reason alone, perhaps, it deserves study in the English classroom, but with some caution.

Regardless of whether humor is subversive or oppressive, positive or neutral or negative in relation to its target, it is most simply defined as a surprising incongruity that evokes laughter (or at least bemusement). As simple as this definition is, however, there are myriad ways to create literary humor, ranging from funny-sounding words to the complex plots of a Shakespearean comedy. Let’s start small, with words, phrases, and sentences. But as we look at ways to help students understand and generate humor, keep in mind that creating humor is challenging. Comedian Drew Carey said that a good stand-up comic

might keep one out of ten jokes that he or she writes. For those of us less professional, our “success” rate is likely to be even lower. It’s important for students to understand two things:

- 1 Not every attempt they make will be funny, perhaps not even most, and that’s okay.
- 2 They increase the likelihood of humorous success with each extra attempt they make at creating a pun or a joke or a story lead.

In other words, it’s the process that counts. The prewriting, drafting, and revising, the starts and stops, and the experiments for the fun of it are all crucial to humor writing.

Language Humor

Language humor relies on the sounds of words, words with multiple meanings, unusual word combinations, and unusual syntax. The most rudimentary examples of such humor can be found in abundance in the nonsense words of children’s literature and songs. Shirley Ellis’s “The Name Game” or, as it is also known, “The Banana Song,” might have as its first verse, “Shirley Shirley bo burley / Banana fana fo firley / Fe fi fo firley / SHIRLEY!” We derive pleasure from such a song (or at least we used to) simply because of the musical sound play and the resistance the sounds have to normal meaning.

We find a slightly more complicated version of this in the Lewis Carroll poem “Jabberwocky.” The opening lines, “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / did gyre and gimble in the wabe,” amuse and puzzle us with the ways such words as *brillig*, *toves*, and *wabe* resemble real words, but resist clear interpretation. Though today, such language play might not induce adolescents and adults to laugh out loud as we once might have, it nevertheless suggests that language and syntax can be inherently amusing. To that end, let’s look at a progression of language humor, moving roughly from simple to more complex.

Slang

We might begin with the single words or short word combinations that generate humor through sound, incongruity, or instability. It only takes a moment in the school hallway to recognize the love young adults have for *slang*. Though worthy of historical study in and of itself, I turn to slang for its comic potential. Slang

tends to play off either humorous sounds or an implied metaphorical incongruity, or both. Take a look at a few slang terms from the past eighty years as listed in Tom Dalzell’s *Flappers 2 Rappers* (Figure 1.1).

Slang of the 1930s	Slang of the 1950s	Slang of the 1980s
booshwash—empty talk, false gasper—a cigarette lulu—something very good pill—disagreeable person	cat—a hip person horn—the telephone pad—an apartment or home split—leave	bogus—bad, disgusting dog—treat someone badly posse—a group of friends skate—to avoid obligations

FIGURE 1.1: Slang terms of the past eighty years show examples of sound play and incongruity.

The word *booshwash* has an appeal largely because of the sound. The word *posse* amuses us because of the incongruous juxtaposition of that Old West image with a group of contemporary teens. Although such words might not evoke laughter, they amuse us for much the same reason that jokes do. These words also appeal to adolescents because they use irony, one of the common strategies for creating humor. This ironic code, this linguistic misdirection, immediately divides listeners or readers into two groups: insiders and outsiders—those who get it, and those who don’t. In so doing, slang marks group membership, and one of the functions of youth slang is to distinguish generational groups. In this sense, slang may have two targets: an explicit one, as in the person being described as a “pill,” and an implied one, which for youth slang is largely the world of adults.

- As a class project, create a slang dictionary for your own school. What’s new? What’s on the way out? What’s the funniest? (UCLA’s linguistics department has students create a college version every few years.)
- Create new slang terms. See if you can get the words to catch on throughout the school.

Jargon

While youth slang is inherently generational, dividing young from old, such creative language use is common among many distinct groups. Athletes, musicians, office workers, soldiers, and others all create a more specific kind of slang, something we might call an informal *jargon* that is connected directly to a specific profession or activity. For example, mountain bikers might use the phrase “brain bucket” to refer to a helmet, or truckers might refer to a tailgating vehicle

as a “bumper sticker.” Here, too, this jargon helps a group solidify a sense of identity and figuratively describe the world around them. *Wired Magazine*, a publication dedicated to new electronic technology, runs a column titled “Jargon Watch” that focuses on the slang generated by people working with new technology. For example, such words and phrases as

beepilepsy—the brief seizure people sometimes suffer when their beepers go off, especially in vibrator mode. Characterized by physical spasms, goofy facial expressions, and stopping speech in mid-sentence.

crash test dummies—those of us who pay for unstable, not-ready-for-prime-time software marketed by greedy computer companies. (“Jargon Watch”)

could only have been created in the past thirty years and are a direct response to human interaction with machines. We find these terms humorous because of the wordplay (sound-alike puns) and the incongruous combination of two words or two images. Given that most students are immersed in electronic technology, this kind of slang is ripe for exploration.

- Make a list of any jargon words you have heard, especially humorous ones.
- Brainstorm ways in which current technology influences you, looking for the odd or humorous aspects of it. Then create five new humorous terms to describe that aspect of your experience with technology.

Students might also identify any other groups to which they belong and explore the jargon of those groups.

- Create a jargon chart for one or more of the following specialized areas:
basketball band drama debate

Portmanteaus

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Carroll uses the term *portmanteau* to describe the mixing of the sound of two words to form a new word that contains the meanings of both original words. He makes ample use of such word combinations in his poem “Jabberwocky,” in which the word *slithy*, for example, is a combination

of both “slimy” and “lithe.” Such portmanteaus occasionally make their way into popular usage, as with the words *brunch* (breakfast/ lunch), *liger* (lion/ tiger offspring), and *motel* (motor/ hotel).

➤ Try combining words from column 1 with words from column 2 (in any order) to see what new words you can create. Start with either word, and feel free to remove some letters if that helps to make the new word sound better.

Column 1	Column 2
artsy	movie
romance	book
good	luck
lunch	fast
gym	joke
evil	bad
math	principal

Comedian Rich Hall made a name for himself by creating new words that he called “sniglets” (sometimes smashing two words together to make one new one, sometimes just tweaking a word) in order to describe unusual events or things that he felt needed a name. For example, in *The Big Book of New American Humor*, Hall suggests the following as necessary additions to the English language:

Disconfect (dis Kon fekt) v. To sterilize the piece of candy you dropped on the floor by blowing on it, somehow assuming this will “remove” all the germs.

Elbonics (el bon iks) n. The actions of two people maneuvering for one armrest in a movie theater. (qtd. in Novak and Waldoks 51)

In the first instance, Hall has combined the words *disinfect* and *confection* to create a word that refers to both simultaneously. In the second instance, he has added the suffix *-ic*, which normally would transform a word into an adjective, but in this case is used more like the *-ic* in *phonics* to create a new noun pertaining to elbow usage. As you can see, there’s no real restriction on how words might be coined, as long as they work.

The website *Addictionary* continues this practice, keeping a growing list of terms such as these:

indecisijig—*noun*, the little dance that happens when you meet a stranger head-on walking the opposite direction and there is indecision about who passes on which side.

shopdrifter—*noun*, a person who takes an item off the shelf in a grocery store, then later decides not to purchase it and places it on some random shelf elsewhere in the store.

The *Addictionary* site also gives readers the opportunity to contribute their own word suggestions for review and possible inclusion. Students could try working with sniglets in class or online.

- Create a class addictionary or sniglet collection.
- Contribute directly to the *Addictionary* word challenge at www.addictionary.org. (Note: as with most online dictionaries, the entries range from G- to R-rated, so some discretion is advised.)

Puns

The *pun* is a form of humor that plays off the ambiguity created when two potential meanings of the same word compete within a sentence. Although Samuel Johnson may have found the pun to be “the lowest form of humour,” many great writers have used them, and most students enjoy them (at least I think their groaning at my puns is a form of appreciation). Puns rely on words with similar sounds, or *homonyms*. Normally, we would define homonym as a word with the same pronunciation as another word, but possessing a different meaning, origin, and often spelling. However, distinguishing between the following can lead to a greater appreciation of the variety of ways to construct puns:

homographs—words that have the same spelling but are different in meaning, origin, and sometimes pronunciation.

One brother fished for *bass* while the other plucked his *bass*.

homophones—words that sound alike but have different meanings, origins, and sometimes spellings.

You were *sweet* to rent us the *suite*.

Some words are both homophones and homographs: She went to *check* on whether her *check* had cleared the bank. And then there is a third type:

homonoids—words that have a similar sound, different spellings, and different meanings.

Faced with a challenging *baroque* recital, the musician decided to go for *broke*.

Students can work with each of these three types of word patterns.

- Using the chart below, construct a humorous sentence or combination of sentences based on the ambiguity of *one* of the homographs.

abuse	buffet	desert	mean	row
address	check	discard	minute	separate
ally	close	dove	present	sow
ax	concert	dress	read	spring
bank	conflict	fan	real	tear
bass	crane	lie	record	use
bed	court	live	refuse	wind
bow	cut	lose	reservations	wound

Examples:

Being in politics is just like playing golf—you are trapped in one bad lie after another.

After receiving a call from the boss telling him to quit for the night, the employee told the other clerks, “That was a close call.”

- Using the chart below, construct a humorous sentence or combination of sentences based on the ambiguity between a *pair* of homophones.

allowed — aloud	dear — deer	mail — male	sole — soul
base — bass	grease — Greece	meat — meet	stair — stare
blew — blue	hair — hare	pear — pair	steal — steel
break — brake	loan — lone	pie — pi	waist — waste
cell — sell	made — maid	right — write	weak — week

(Note: only one of the paired words is likely to appear in the sentence; the other is implied.)

Examples:

For this activity, the students should work in pairs, or apples if you'd prefer.

If you divide the circumference of a pumpkin by its diameter, you get pumpkin pi.

- Take a famous phrase, and then consider homonoid half-rhymes that might replace the key words in the phrase. Create a sentence or combination of sentences that set up the pun in the altered phrase. For example, take the phrase “goes from bad to worse” and consider possible homonoid substitutes for the key words. For *bad* we might substitute *bed* or *cad*. For *worse* we might substitute *hearse* or *verse*. Substitute one, or both, words to create a new saying. Then write a lead-in that will set up that new phrase.
 - The poet who writes first thing every morning goes from bed to verse.
 - The evil man who insults Lara Croft often goes from cad to hearse.

Rather than focus on the types of homonyms, a different approach to puns is to explore multi-meaning words associated with a single topic. For example, words that have more than one possible meaning related to the English classroom might include *workshop*, *PowerPoint*, *rules*, *conventions*, *elements*, and *character*. From such words, comic sentences that play off multiple meanings can then be constructed: “I used a PowerPoint in my speech—darn near poked the eye out of a kid in the front row.” Such an activity prompts students to associate metaphorically and think in divergent ways to uncover multiple possibilities.

- Create a list of multi-meaning words associated with each of the following:

baseball band drama school rules

Write humorous sentences that at first suggest one possible meaning for one of the words on your list, then twist the reader toward a second definition.

One of the most common sources for unintentionally funny puns is newspaper headlines. Because headlines try to condense language, removing much

of the context and modifiers necessary for unambiguous understanding, they frequently leave readers wondering about multiple meanings. For example, in the headline “Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim,” there are two possible meanings: (1) the paramedics are attending to the injuries of a person who was attacked by a dog, or (2) the paramedics are assisting the dog in its attempts to bite the victim. The humor of this headline revolves around the pun in the word *bite*, which can be either a noun, as in the first meaning, or a verb, as in the second. Here are some other examples:

Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers

Iraqi Head Seeks Arms

Red Tape Holds Up Bridge

- Browse headlines from local papers. How many potential puns can you find? (The sports page often offers the ripest pickings.)
- Skim through a recent paper and look for an article that relies on a multi-meaning word, or think of one that might apply. Create a punning headline for that article.

One last source for puns is the advertisement. The writers of ad slogans employ a variety of strategies, including rhyme, coined words, figurative language, and occasionally puns. Some of the puns within the slogans are general and could apply to any similar company.

Security company: *Alarmed? You should be.*

Telephone company: *Technology the world calls on.*

Some puns are “branded,” or integrated directly into the company or specific product name so that the slogan can apply to only one company.

Kodak Gold film: *Is your film as good as Gold?*

John Deere tractor: *Nothing Runs Like a Deere*

- Create one general pun and one branded pun for one or more products that you use.

Oronyms

We can extend our exploration of puns by adding the concept of *oronyms*, word combinations that sound the same, especially in the rush of normal speech, but have different meanings.

ice cream—I scream
Ice cream is a delicious dessert.
I scream for a delicious dessert.

mature—much your
I’m not sure how mature students will like that film.
I’m not sure how much your students will like that film.

Oronyms are a favorite strategy, along with simpler puns, of knock-knock jokes. For example, the name Norma Lee sounds much like the word *normally*, allowing for this joke:

Knock knock! Who’s there? Norma Lee. Norma Lee who? Normally I wouldn’t bother you, but I need a cup of sugar.

> Create a couple of knock-knock jokes that include an oronym.

If students want a more difficult challenge, they might try writing a short poem or narrative in oronym form. Examples can be found in numerous places on the Internet. Do a Web search for “Eye Halve a Spelling Chequer” and “Laddle Rat Rotten Hut.”

Eye Halve a Spelling Chequer Eye halve a spelling chequer It came with my pea sea It plainly marques four my revue Miss steaks eye kin knot sea [...] <i>(Sauce unknown)</i>	Laddle Rat Rotten Hut Wants pawn term, dare worsted ladle gull hoe lift wetter murder inner ladle cordage, honor itch offer lodge, dock, florist. Disk ladle gull orphan worry putty ladle rat cluck wetter ladle rat hut, an fur disk raisin pimple colder Ladle Rat Rotten Hut [...] H. L. Chace
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Mondegreens

Related to the oronym is the *mondegreen*—the misinterpretation of a poem or song lyrics arising from mishearing. Sylvia Wright coined the term in a 1954 *Harper's Magazine* column to describe her frustration when she discovered her own mishearing of a line of poetry as a child. For years, she had thought these were the last two lines of the Scottish ballad “The Bonny Earl of Murray”:

They ha'e slain the Earl of Murray,
And the Lady Mondegreen.

when in fact the lines were these:

They ha'e slain the Earl of Murray,
And they laid him on the Green.

Experiencing a mondegreen is common to almost everyone who listens to contemporary music. Here are a few common examples:

I'll never leave your pizza burning (a mishearing of “I'll never be your beast of burden” sung by the Rolling Stones).

Excuse me while I kiss this guy (a mishearing of “Excuse me while I kiss the sky,” sung by Jimi Hendrix).

There's a bathroom on the right (a mishearing of “There's a bad moon on the rise,” sung by Creedence Clearwater Revival).

- Make a list of any mondegreens you've personally experienced when listening to music.
- Look at the lyrics of several pop songs and search for possible oronyms with which to “create” a mondegreen.

Daffynitions

The process by which we intentionally create oronyms or unintentionally create mondegreens leads us directly to the *daffynition*, which can be defined as the punning definition of what a word sounds like. In many cases, this means treating a single word as if it were a portmanteau. Here are a few example daffynitions:

dandelion—a well-dressed large cat

relief—what trees do in the spring

stalemate—an old spouse

porcupine—a craving for bacon

- Create daffynitions for each of the following words.

avoidable	eyedropper	handicap
boycott	paradox	selfish
buccaneer	protein	syntax

- Brainstorm a list of words that sound like they could be portmanteaus.
- Create daffynitions for each of those words.

Grammar and Conventions Humor

Metaphorical Verbs

In *Comedy Writing Secrets*, Melvin Helitzer recommends engaging writers in “association” brainstorms as kind of mental warm-up (82). For one such activity, give students a character in terms of profession—firefighter, police officer, dog catcher, gardener—and then ask them to brainstorm as many verbal adjectives as they can that might metaphorically describe a physical or psychological condition of that person. For example, in describing how a firefighter might feel coming home from work, one might list *burned up*, *torched*, *fired up*, *steaming*, and *not too hot*, while a similar list for a gardener might include such terms as *hosed*, *potted*, *bushed*, *seedy*, and *all wet*.

- Brainstorm similar lists for the following professions:

- police officer
- teacher
- student
- surgeon

Students can also approach *metaphorical verbs* by exploring the various ways we use animals and objects to describe the actions of people. For example, a child can “rocket around the house” or “canter” or “dart.”

- Brainstorm a list of verbs based on objects or animals.
- Create some new ones, using each in a sentence that explains the meaning of the verb in context. For example:
 - Millie podded her way through school, seldom taking the earbuds out in class.
 - Joe slothed into the chair and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Metaphorical Adjectives

As with many verbs, some adjectives are inherently metaphorical, making a connection between the noun being described and some animal or thing. For example, in the sentence, “The piggish boy rooted through the dessert tray,” we understand that the boy has the appetite and table manners of a pig. Authors use such *metaphorical adjectives* to create a comic tension between the two images. If you’d like to help students develop a bit of vocabulary in relation to this activity, you might point out that we have more “scientific” adjectives for most animals (see *The Phrase Finder* at www.phrases.org.uk/animal-adjectives.html for a list). For example, we could replace *piggish* with *porcine*, though the comic effect is more subtle, perhaps slightly more mature.

- Brainstorm a list of possible animal-related adjectives that could be used to describe a person. (Look up “scientific” equivalents.)
- Create new animal-based adjectives that might be useful in describing a person. Use these new adjectives in a sentence that reveals the meaning in context. (For example, “He was battish, seldom coming out of his dark bedroom except at night.”)

Metaphorical Adverbs

We can also use adverbs to generate metaphorical tension in a description of a person’s actions. Here, too, animals are a major contributor, as in the sentence, “She walked sheepishly into the classroom.” Because we use them so frequently, such adverbs don’t generate much tension anymore. However, students could

examine the lists they created for adjectives (old and new) and generate some fresh *metaphorical adverbs* from them: “He burrowed molishly into the mess of his room.”

➤ Create new animal adverbs.

For fun, students can explore the use of *Tom Swifties*, a term used to describe a dialogue tag such as “said” that is modified by an adverb that creates a pun out of some aspect of the dialogue, as in the following:

I hate exams,” Tom said *testily*.

“I just love Roman architecture,” Tom said *archly*.

“This canoe is leaking,” Tom said *balefully*.

Although such adverb use is a bit over the top even for most humor writing situations, it does provide an intriguing mental challenge.

➤ Create half a dozen sentences that incorporate Tom Swifties.

Though they most typically pun through an adverb, Tom Swifties can also involve a punning verb:

“I think I’m dying,” Tom croaked.

“Get your cat off me,” she hissed.

Students can explore this variation in conjunction with the adverb exercise, or extend the exploration of metaphorical verbs (see previous discussion) with a few of these funny dialogue tags.

Incongruous Word Pairs

Some words just don’t seem to belong together, violating either our sense of logic or our sense of how syntax should work, and the resulting tension puzzles and amuses the listener. Writers most often make use of such *incongruous pairings* to create either logical incongruity—that joke went over like a *lead balloon*—or the intriguing sounds and unstable meanings generated by unusual syntax, as

when two (or even three) nouns follow each other in a sentence. An example is Allen Ginsberg's use of the phrase "hydrogen jukebox" in his poem "Howl" (11, line 50). The playful aspect of such incongruous words also makes this a common strategy in the naming of rock bands, such as Led Zeppelin, Blind Melon, and Asphalt Ballet. Check out the page "Make Band Names" on the Band Name Maker website (www.bandnamemaker.com) and use the "Band Name Generator," which will give random word combinations or allow you to provide one word to which it then responds. For example, I provided "grammar," and the site returned the intriguing combinations of "grammar thunder" and "grammar casket." Have students try this activity:

- Brainstorm incongruous word pairs.
- Define these phrases (or ones created by "Band Name Generator"). Just what might "grammar casket" mean?

Ambiguous Pronouns

As with most words that have unstable meanings, pronouns can lead to humorous confusion. A vague or *ambiguous pronoun* reference occurs when there is uncertainty about which previous noun, or antecedent, a pronoun indicates. Usually such vagueness is merely a little confusing, as in the sentence, "Joe asked Bill to bring his brother to the game." In this case, "his" could refer to either Joe or Bill. Occasionally, though, such ambiguity creates a humorous moment when the wrong noun is suddenly implicated in an inappropriate action or condition:

After the boys got out of their cars, the girls hosed *them* down.

John kicked the soccer ball off the back of an opponent's head *which* rolled into the goal for a score.

Because ambiguous pronoun use is a rather common student writing error, such humorous examples can be used for corrective purposes. But the challenge of intentionally creating such errors for the sake of humor is also a great way to supplement learning how to apply the rules for pronouns and antecedents.

- Create humorous sentences by making ambiguous connections between at least two or more antecedent nouns and such pronouns as *he, she, they, them, it, that, and which*.

Mixing Direct and Indirect Objects

For our purposes, we'll define a *direct object* as a noun or pronoun (or a noun phrase or clause) upon which the action of a verb is directed. For example, in the sentence, "He poured *lemonade*," the lemonade receives the action of the verb. On the other hand, an *indirect object* generally precedes the direct object and informs us to whom or for whom the action of the verb is done, as in the sentence, "He poured *Jane* lemonade." In some cases, when we mix up or leave out the direct object, we wind up with a humorous, inappropriate action. For example, if we leave out the direct object and add another action, we might get "He poured and served Jane."

- Combine the following sentences while leaving out the first direct object:
 - The cowgirl roped the bull. The cowgirl thrilled the audience.
 - The teachers cooked pancakes. The teachers served the students.
- Create several sentences that make the indirect object the inappropriate direct object of a verb's action.

Misplaced Modifiers

Simply put, a *misplaced modifier* is a word, phrase, or dependent clause that has been inappropriately separated from the noun it is supposed to modify in a sentence that has more than one noun. As with ambiguous pronouns, misplaced modifiers can frequently lead to humorous connections between the modifying description and the wrong noun. These mistakes can take many forms, but we'll focus on two types that also connect easily to instruction on how to develop details in a sentence.

The Participle

Sentences containing participles or participial phrases are prone to misplacement errors. A *participle* is a verbal, either present tense ending in *-ing* or past tense ending in *-ed* or an irregular past tense form, that acts as an adjective. For example, in the sentence, "Joe watched fireworks *exploding*," the word *exploding* works as an adjective modifying *fireworks*. A participial phrase begins with such a verbal and is followed by some combination of other modifiers and complements, as in "Joe watched the fireworks *exploding in a colorful display*." Potentially humorous problems arise, however, whenever such a phrase is moved in the sentence so that it is closer to a noun that is not the one it is supposed to modify.

Exploding in a colorful display, Joe watched the fireworks.

We can only hope the people sitting next to Joe weren't hurt when he exploded. Past participial phrases work just as well:

Wrapped with pretty paper and tied with a bow, Mike handed her the gift.

She'd better appreciate his efforts to look good.

An exploration of misplaced participial phrases might easily follow a lesson on how to use such phrases to develop details in sentences. As with other "grammar humor," understanding the correct use is generally a prerequisite for intentional misuse. To that end, first ask students to correctly combine the following sentences:

My mother watched the factory smoke stack.

The factory smoke stack was belching fire and smoking to the heavens.

Here is the resulting combination:

My mother watched the factory smoke stack *belching fire and smoking to the heavens*.

Then have the students move the describing phrases to the front of the sentence to see what happens:

Belching fire and smoking to the heavens, my mother watched the factory smoke stack.

Once students have a sense of how to correctly add participial phrases and understand the effects of doing it wrong, they are ready to try intentionally creating a few.

- Write a sentence with two nouns, and add a participial phrase to modify the last noun in the sentence. Next, move the participial phrase to the front of the sentence so that it modifies the wrong noun.

The more absurd or silly the crossed descriptions, the funnier the mistake.

The Absolute

A second type of frequently misplaced modifier is the *absolute*, a phrase usually consisting of a noun and a modifier of that noun. In its correct position, an absolute offers a deeper description of a noun. For example, in the sentence, “Sirens howling and lights flashing, the ambulance raced to the hospital,” the two absolutes (*sirens howling*, *lights flashing*) modify the noun (*ambulance*), giving the reader a more complete image. However, when misplaced, absolutes can create an incongruous picture:

Their tails twitching, their claws flashing, the boys tormented the cats.

His nose bulbous and red, his face pasty white, the principal watched the clown perform at the assembly.

As with the misplacement of participial phrases, an exploration of misplaced absolutes might accompany a lesson on how to use absolutes to develop details in sentences. Here, too, sentence combining might be a good place to start:

The burglar faced the dog.

The dog’s fur was ruffled.

The dog’s teeth were bared.

These sentences can be combined to make one:

The burglar faced the dog, *fur ruffled, teeth bared*.

Having combined the sentences correctly, students can then play with the consequences of misplacement:

Fur ruffled, teeth bared, the burglar faced the dog.

From here, students can try this activity:

- Generate a sentence containing two nouns, and add an absolute to further describe one of the nouns. Move the absolute so it now appears to modify the other noun.

Malaprops

A *malaprop* occurs whenever someone substitutes an inappropriate, yet similar-sounding word for another in a sentence. Coined from the French, the phrase *mal á propos*—meaning “badly suited”—appears early in English literature in the speech of many Shakespearean characters (Dogberry, Bottom, Elbow, and others) and in the character of Mrs. Malaprop (with whom the term originated) in Richard Sheridan’s *The Rivals*. See the Wikipedia page “Malapropism” for numerous examples of literary, film, and pop culture malaprops, including these:

“Our watch, sir, have indeed *comprehended* two *auspicious* persons.” (that is, *apprehended*, *suspicious*) —*Much Ado about Nothing*, Act 3, Scene V

“I am not going to make a *skeptical* out of my boxing career.” (that is, *spectacle*) —Tonya Harding

“The *ironing* is delicious.” (that is, *irony*) —Bart Simpson after finding Lisa in detention.

“I’m so smart it’s almost scary. I guess I’m a child *progeny*.” (that is, *prodigy*) —Calvin, to which Hobbes replies, “Most children are.”

Another source of such malaprops is students, as linguist and teacher Richard Lederer has documented in several books, such as *Anguished English*, which includes these examples:

“The Puritans thought every event significant because it was a massage from God.” (7)

“A triangle which has an angle of 135 degrees is called an obscene triangle.” (5)

The easiest way to create malaprops is to begin with two sound-alike words or phrases and then construct a sentence that allows the misuse of one of them.

indomitable—abominable: The abominable explorer sailed westward.

acute—a cute: He had a cute appendicitis.

gorge—garage: He had a double-car gorge with a blue door.

As with grammar humor, creating intentional mistakes generally requires that one know the correct usage. In this case, malaprops can be a humorous way to liven up a vocabulary study when employed in the traditional way of having students use their vocabulary words in a sentence.

- Brainstorm sound-alike words or phrases for a few words in your vocabulary list. Create malaprop sentences using the wrong word in place of the correct vocabulary word.

Typos

Akin to malaprops, but generated from a different kind of error, is the humorous *typo*. Most typographical errors result in the creation of misspelled words that are not funny. Occasionally, however, typos result in meanings that are radically altered from what was originally intended: “He told the police that one of them menaced him with a wench while the other covered him with a revolver.” The distinction between a typo and a malaprop is one of degree—a malaprop might be quite different in spelling from the word intended, but a typo is usually off by only one letter. In addition, malaprops are typically spoken by a character, but typos are necessarily written. As a result, typos tend to work best when associated with such things as official reports, advertisements, menus, newsletters, and the like.

- Brainstorm a list of items that might be included on a school lunch menu. Consider which ones might be altered with a one-letter typo. Create a humorous typo for a school menu item.
- Look at some magazine advertisements, and make a list of the words used. Consider which ones might be altered with a typo. Revise the advertisement for humorous effect.

Jokes

The Rule of Three

One of the most common strategies for creating jokes is the *rule of three*. The writer creates a list or series of three ideas or things: the first sets the theme, the second confirms it, and the third twists it into a moment of surprise. Film

director and comedian Woody Allen uses the rule of three frequently. A passage complaining about the narrator's declining health sets up the reader with "My room is damp and I have perpetual chills and palpitations of the heart," and then the narrator surprises the reader with "I noticed, too, that I am out of napkins. Will it never stop?" (227) Sherman Alexie is fond of using this strategy for a kind of dark comic effect. In his poem "Father Coming Home," Alexie describes the father as "carrying the black metal lunch box with maybe half a sandwich, maybe the last drink of good coffee out of the thermos, maybe the last bite of a dream" (*Business* 63), surprising us with the last phrase.

The three items can be single words—"He was my dream date: *tall*, *dark*, and *dumb*"—short phrases, or complete sentences. In *The Comic Tool Box*, John Vorhaus recommends an activity in which student writers complete the sentence starter "Three things you should (never) . . ." by listing two expected answers and following those with a truly unexpected answer (105). For example:

Three things you should never say to your English teacher:

"I don't have a pen."

"This book is boring."

"Is that your hair, or is a porcupine on your head?"

Recognizing the value of such surprises and practicing this technique in a variety of forms will allow students to work unexpected humor into their own writing.

- Create a sentence, reviewing a movie you've seen, that uses a series of single words, the first two setting a pattern of expectation, and the third word humorously violating it.
- Create a series of three sentences, describing yourself, with the first two following a logical pattern, and the third undercutting that pattern.

Reversals

A standard element of many jokes, the *reversal* takes a recognizable character type or situation, gives the audience just enough to set up expectations, and then violates those expectations with a contradictory conclusion. For example, we're all familiar with the stories that older people often tell about how maturity and experience has helped them understand the world in a more thoughtful way.

When Oscar Wilde says, “When I was young, I thought that money was the most important thing in life. Now that I’m old—I know it is,” he depends on our familiarity with this situation and sets reader expectations for a lesson in wisdom. But the last four words of his statement reverse that expectation.

Because jokes or witty statements are usually quite short, the author or speaker does not have much time to evoke expectations. As a result, these jokes tend to rely on people, things, or events that are easily recognized in just a few words. This is one of the reasons we see categories of humor such as doctor jokes or mother-in-law jokes or cat jokes or jokes about football or baseball. Each of these categories relies on a stereotypical knowledge of the subject. Notice how the following joke depends on our previous knowledge of the character type, and how the expectations from that knowledge are reversed in the end.

“I told my psychiatrist that everyone hates me. He said I was being ridiculous—everyone hasn’t met me yet.” —Rodney Dangerfield

The joke is funny precisely because a flippant and hostile response is so incongruous with our perception of psychiatrists and how they communicate with their patients.

Similar expectations can be evoked by common events with which we are familiar. Comedian Steve Martin sets up this punning joke with a picture of a loving pet owner:

I gave my cat a bath the other day. They love it. He just sat there and enjoyed it.
It was fun for me. The fur kept sticking to my tongue, but other than that ... (49)

The reversal here is all the more effective because it not only disrupts our expectations of bathing a pet, but does so by switching the speaker’s traits with the cat.

Students can ease into this technique with a couple of prompts:

- Complete the following with statements that reverse the expectations.
- I went to a high school football game. It was really violent. You should have seen . . .
 - My English teacher is a real stickler for rules . . .
 - I said to my school counselor, “I’m having difficulty concentrating on my schoolwork.” She said, . . .

Then students can create expectations on their own:

- Create several reversal jokes by first providing a recognizable setup and then following it with a reverse.

Setup: _____

Reverse: _____

Misdirection

Similar to reversal, *misdirection* involves deliberately misleading the reader into thinking a sentence or paragraph is heading in one direction, and then quickly changing direction to surprise the reader. Typically, misdirection begins with easily recognizable kinds of texts— clichés, famous or everyday documents, popular song lyrics, or even joke standards. For example, consider this joke:

Three men walk into a bar; you'd think one of them would have seen it.

Here, the humor relies on the reader recognizing the standard “walk into a bar” joke form. This sets up an anticipated direction, which presumably involves going into a bar and having a conversation with the bartender or other patrons. The misdirection of this joke hinges on the pun on the word *bar*. Yet this is only revealed in the second part of the joke, which now places the men on a sidewalk, or at a construction site, but probably not in a place where they can order drinks. (For a good visual example of misdirection, see the many *Calvin and Hobbes* comics that begin with Calvin as Spaceman Spiff or the detective Tracer Bullet, only to end up with Calvin in his seat in class or being chased by his mother.)

Although students can create misdirection jokes out of any quickly recognizable text, the easiest way to give them practice is to explore clichés. Normally, clichés are the bane of student essays, and we struggle to help students recognize why including such overused phrases weakens their writing. The following activity attempts to turn the negative into a positive, showing students how to transform clichés into effective humorous moments. The problem with clichés is that there is no moment of surprise or freshness, so we need to alter the cliché in such a way that it ends with a surprise.

- Find a cliché or short aphorism:

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

- Then brainstorm alternative endings that will surprise the reader. W. C. Fields offered this: “If at first you don’t succeed, *then quit. There’s no sense being a fool about it.*”

The surprise ending might replace part of the cliché, or it might follow:

“What goes up, must come down, *but don’t expect it to come down where you can find it.*” —Lily Tomlin

And students might find it easier if they add the word *if* at the beginning of the cliché to help set up the surprise:

“If all the world’s a stage, *it’s time to change the director.*” —Russell Goebel

Have your students brainstorm some common clichés and aphorisms, or search for clichés at *Cliche Finder* (www.westegg.com/cliche) and give them new life.

Non Sequitur

There are two kinds of *non sequiturs*—logical and literary. In logic, a non sequitur is a conclusion that does not follow two or more premises that are assumed to be true. Usually these premises are not particularly funny. For example, a detective might note that the murderer used a pair of scissors as a weapon, and the professor owned a pair of scissors; therefore, the professor is the murderer. Whether or not the conclusion is true, it doesn’t really follow from the two premises provided and certainly wouldn’t stand up in a court. Occasionally, seemingly logical non sequiturs can be amusing: “God is love. Love is blind. Ray Charles is blind. Therefore, Ray Charles is God” (“Ray Charles”).

Most humorous non sequiturs, though, are of the literary type and tend to be absurd conclusions or interruptions in a kind of story logic. Misdirection might suggest that a joke is headed in one direction, and then the joke takes us in another; one form of literary non sequitur might suggest a direction, only to lead us into a nonsensical dead end. For example:

How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Giraffe.

A more common type of literary non sequitur involves the insertion of a comment that is completely out of context, with a bit of dialogue or stream of thought. If, during the interrogation of our hapless, murdering professor, the detective says,

“We know you own a pair of scissors, so you might as well confess. And, by the way, did you know there’s a great sale today at Macy’s?”

the reader will likely be surprised by the seemingly random insertion of shopping. Students might play with literary non sequiturs through the following:

- Take a standard joke and give it a non sequitur punch line.
- Create a short piece of dialogue in which one of the characters keeps inserting seemingly random comments.

You might also point out that visual non sequiturs are common in humorous films. For example, in *Blazing Saddles*, as the bad guys are galloping their horses across a desert of scrub and sage brush, they are suddenly delayed by a toll-booth that requires dimes.

Exaggeration

Humor that intensifies some aspect of a character or a condition relies not so much on incongruity for its effect as on distortion. Writers look for a distinctive physical trait, a behavior, a manner of speech, and then exaggerate it so that, like a fun-house mirror, the distortion makes us laugh. Think of the way that political cartoons take one physical feature—Bill Clinton’s chin or George W. Bush’s ears—and stretch it to the limits of recognition. Of all the humor strategies covered in this chapter, *exaggeration* carries with it the greatest potential for hostile critique. Exaggeration is at the root of most ethnic and gender humor (whether oppressive or subversive) and revels in stereotypes that can be amplified. Such humor is usually too risky for a secondary classroom, even if the study of such humor can reveal a great deal about the history of racism, sexism, ableism, and other prejudices. So we’ll place some boundaries on our exploration.

In general, exaggeration tends to focus on physical qualities, abilities, or some event or condition, most often emphasizing the negative. Given that negative humor about other people is often offensive, let’s look at a few alternatives that make this safer for the classroom. First, we might limit ourselves to self-deprecating humor, keeping ourselves as the target. For example:

Physical quality: “I was skinny. I’d turn sideways and disappear.”
—Sherman Alexie

Ability: I was such a bad student that in middle school I flunked lunch.

Condition: “There were thirteen kids in my family. We were so poor we had to eat cereal with a fork, so we could pass the milk to the next kid.”
—Bernie Mac

Before pursuing this activity, be sure students understand that the jokes don’t need to have anything to do with their real selves. They are simply using “I” as a target because that’s relatively safe. If it helps, they can imagine a fictional character who is speaking.

- Create three self-deprecating exaggerations about a physical trait.
- Create three self-deprecating exaggerations about incompetence in some area.

(Note: if students need help getting started, suggest that they begin with phrases such as “I’m so __ that . . .” or “I’m so bad at __ that . . .”)

Alternatively, students can pick a safe external target, such as cats or dogs.

Physical quality: My dog’s breath is so bad, it knocks squirrels out of trees.

Ability: My cat is so lazy that she hires other cats to nap for her.

- Create two exaggerations about a pet’s physical qualities.
- Create two exaggerations about a pet’s abilities.

Exaggerating about things, conditions, or events is usually a bit safer than focusing on personal qualities, because no one person or group is necessarily targeted. Instead, a writer chooses a recognizable moment or thing and distorts its effect. For example, “That band was so bad that even the cockroaches left the building.”

- Create an exaggerated negative response to one of the following:

basketball game	homework	pep rally	school hallway
bus ride	lecture	pop song	school lunch
field trip	movie	school dance	school play

Of course, exaggeration can focus on the positive; unfortunately, we simply don’t find positive distortions nearly as funny as negative ones. But that in itself

can be the challenge. Students can repeat the previous activities while emphasizing some positive aspect: “I’m so handsome that . . .” “My dog’s so smart that . . .” “The band was so good that . . .” Or you might challenge them to a kind of reverse “dozens” contest.

➤ With a partner, take turns trying to top one another’s exaggerations in response to some version of the following: My mama’s so smart that . . .

Top Ten Lists

One comic form of joke with which nearly all students are already familiar is the *top ten list*. This list is really a series of one-liner jokes based on the same theme, usually using exaggeration or irony as humor strategies. David Letterman has made this a staple of the *Late Show*. Here’s how one begins:

Top Ten Signs You’re Watching a Bad Monster Movie

10. Monster comes to New York, takes in a matinee of “Jersey Boys” and leaves.
 9. He doesn’t eat people—he just licks them. [...]
- (For the rest of this list and many others, see the *Late Show* Top Ten Archive online at http://lateshow.cbs.com/latenight/lateshow/top_ten/archive.)

Notice how such a list also relies on surprise by offering answers that oppose our normal expectations. In other words, we have to know what makes a good monster movie and understand the monster film genre in order to get the jokes. In this sense, the challenge for student writers is to know the topic well and then to think in opposites with a bit of exaggeration.

Laurie Halse Anderson uses a slightly different version of this comic strategy in her novel *Speak*, by having the traumatized main character, Melinda, point out some of the essential ironies of high school life:

The First Ten Lies They Tell You in High School

1. We are here to help you.
2. You will have enough time to get to your class before the bell rings.
3. The dress code will be enforced. [...] (5–6)

In this list, the humorous surprise depends on the reader recognizing incongruity between the school’s claims and students’ actual experiences.

By being selective about the *topic*, a teacher can turn this into an interpretive activity or an examination of high school culture or an exploration of national politics.

- Create top ten lists for the following:
- Top Ten Signs the Old Man Has Been Out to Sea Too Long
 - Top Ten Things You Should Never Do at a High School Dance
 - Top Ten Ways You Know Your Member of Congress Is Making Promises that Won't Be Kept

For a change of pace, students might want to try their hands at humorous multiple-choice questions that follow essentially the same format, with the question providing the topic, and the four answers providing the humor.

Comic Definitions

Unlike daffynitions that intentionally misinterpret a word for comic effect, *comic definitions* take the word at face value, but offer a humorous interpretation of its standard meaning. Ambrose Bierce popularized this kind of comic definition in his 1911 book *The Devil's Dictionary*, in which he offered numerous explanations of terms, particularly about politics, social mores, and religion, which were frequently more “accurate” than one would find in a typical dictionary.¹ For example, he skewers both the right and the left in the following:

CONSERVATIVE, n. A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.

In some ways, Bierce was a precursor to the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) Doublespeak Award, in that he revealed the ways in which people use language to mask their real intentions. This is one of the reasons that Bierce's approach to defining terms, and the approach of his many imitators, is often called *cynical lexicography*. This gives us a clue as to how to go about creating such definitions. One strategy is to assume the worst in ourselves and others (it's just an exercise, not a lifestyle recommendation) and then interpret a term with the idea that someone has something to hide. For example, consider the following definitions:

ADMIRATION, n. Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.

APOLOGIZE, v.i. To lay the foundation for a future offence.

EGOTIST, n. A person of low taste, more interested in himself than in me.

Bierce skewers each definition to point out the psychological rationalizing that we seldom admit. A second approach, especially with terms about professions

or types of people, is to identify a strength and exaggerate it into a weakness, as Bierce does in the following:

- HISTORIAN, n. A broad-gauge gossip.
- LAWYER, n. One skilled in circumvention of the law.

Most terms can be explained in such a cynically humorous way, but students might find the task most interesting if they have the opportunity to define the terms pertaining to school life.

➤ Create an *Imp’s Dictionary* that uses humorous, school-based definitions for the following terms:

school	teacher	school lunch	date	cell phone
art	student	locker	boyfriend	football
math	principal	pep rally	girlfriend	soccer
science	counselor	dance	music	band
English	vice principal	fire alarm	textbook	backpack

Captions

Creating *captions* for photographs is another great way to practice creative thinking and apply a variety of humor strategies. Photos of pets can work particularly

well, though if you visit the *I Can Haz Cheez Burger* website (<http://icanhascheezburger.com>), you’ll see examples of humorous captions to photos sorted in categories of cats, dogs, celebrities, news, sports, and others. The photos themselves don’t have to be funny. For example, look at the image of a kitten in Figure 1.2. It’s cute, but not funny. However, if we caption it by giving surprising thoughts to the cat, we can use the photo as a means



FIGURE 1.2.

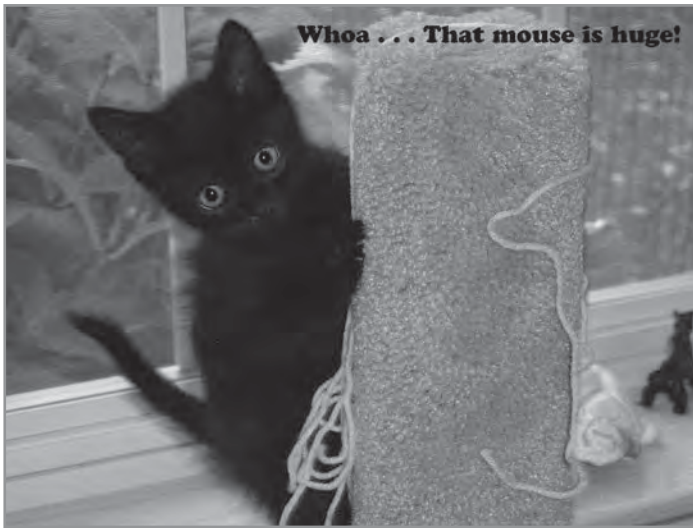


FIGURE 1.3.

toward humor. The first step is to imagine what a slightly personified cat might be thinking in this situation. Then find a humorous way to give voice to those thoughts, as shown in Figure 1.3.

The following captions all use the same photo for a different joke.

More catnip?

Oh, no . . . claws stuck. Help!

Today the scratching post . . . tomorrow the curtains.

Notice how each of these exaggerates a different personality type that we might associate with the kitten—from scared to gluttonous to helpless to mischievous.

- Bring in two or three photos of your pets (or pick some animal photos from *National Geographic*). Working in small groups, generate several captions for each of the photos.

Note

1. Although Bierce's dictionary is largely classroom appropriate, it does contain some of the ethnic slurs common in its day. In addition, many of the definitions are heavily ironic and satiric. Student readers should understand that Bierce is not advocating, but rather describing what he sees as corrupt perspectives and behaviors in his society.

Humor Writing

In an educational environment of high-stakes tests and school accountability, humor has been virtually banned from the classroom. That's a shame, and perhaps a mistake, since student success depends on engagement, and young adults seem to be naturally drawn to comic media. How can you take advantage of your students' interest in humorous material? According to Bruce A. Goebel, incorporating humor writing into the classroom not only reduces student anxiety but also provides them with an opportunity to study and practice the careful and effective use of language.

Divided into four chapters—(1) Humorous Words, Phrases, and Sentences, (2) Funny Stories and Essays, (3) Light Verse, and (4) Parody—the book offers more than 150 activities you can use to help students develop writing skills in voice, word choice, style, and organization while exploring a variety of genres. Depending on your purpose and needs, you can either sprinkle brief lessons throughout your instructional units or create an extended humor writing unit.

Perhaps most important, these activities offer students the rare opportunity to express their creative, divergent-thinking sides in an increasingly serious classroom space.



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