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.

Bruce A. Goebel, previously a secondary English teacher, now teaches in the Department of English at Western Washington University, where he offers courses on humor, American literature, young adult literature, and English teaching methods.
Introduction

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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 effect [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, onymms, 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.
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.

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