Not Just a Humorous Text: Humor as Text in the Writing Class

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The use of humorous texts in the writing class can help students improve skills in effective writing while encouraging critical thinking and an increased range in expression. In addition, because of the accessible nature of humor and the focus on purpose and audience that is necessary when writing it, students show a natural inclination toward peer review and recursive writing, with an enthusiasm that is often lacking when working with traditional texts in the writing class.

Barbara, a high school language arts teacher, tells the following personal anecdote to her class, who appeared to be dozing off in the middle of a lesson during which she was explicating a scene from *The Great Gatsby*:

One day, my husband and his buddies were joking around, taking turns making grand claims of physical superiority and slinging jibes declaring the ability to run faster or throw farther than every other guy in the group. Goaded, one of the guys (the ‘new guy’) turned to my husband and said, “Yeah, well I can do more push-ups than you and your father combined!” My husband, with a solemn look, said, “Dude, my dad lost both his arms in the war . . .” and a hush fell over the group. A horrified look came over the new guy as he sputtered, apologized, and took back the claim. My husband and the other guys then burst out laughing while pointing at a photograph of my husband and his father flexing their arms at each other.

This brief anecdote was used by Barbara to make more accessible a scene in *The Great Gatsby* where the character had put his foot in his mouth. Barbara then proceeded to ask her students to share similar stories in which they may have witnessed or even been more than just a spectator in a similar foot-tasting. The students’ hands shot up, and their shared stories and laughter invigorated the once silent and still classroom.
In this classroom scenario, it would appear that Barbara just used a funny story to liven up her class. Though the enjoyable element of humor is indeed an important benefit in the classroom, it is not the only one. When incorporated appropriately and thoughtfully by the teacher, humor can also be a valuable pedagogical tool, as it was in Barbara’s class, which can encourage critical thinking and increase the accessibility of instruction. For the writing class in particular, humor can be used in assignments to help students improve their range of written expression and internalize techniques of writing for audience and purpose.

**I Don’t Get It . . .**

Whether in humor or in writing, no one likes to hear the words “I don’t get it” from the audience. One of the principle features in the appreciation of humor and of writing is the accessibility of the text. Will the audience understand? Can the audience relate? We’ve all been witness to at least one joke-telling session where the jokester begins telling a joke only to stop and start again because the joke hasn’t been set up correctly. Or perhaps even more common is the humorous version of the “big fish” story where our friends’ anecdotes take on new elements and increasingly exaggerated details as they are retold over time to different audiences. Such measures are taken to ensure the audience “gets it,” meaning that they not only understand the story but appreciate the humor behind it as well. This is the enigmatic power of the humorous text, as opposed to other texts; this element of humor that suddenly drives the author not only to seek to get the audience to comprehend the hidden meanings and messages, but also to experience this elusive emotion in tandem with the information received.

When I taught college composition, I had my first-year students post weekly to an online discussion board forum. The discussion board assignments ranged from freewrites on a predetermined topic to collaborative writing assignments to discussions on the readings. In these assignments, the discussion board that garnered the most response was the week when the students were to share “memorable stories.” All but three students shared humorous stories. When we debriefed in class the following week, students could recite characters and memorable parts of the stories their peers had written—from the crazy German guy with the salami and the pistol in Trevor’s story to Jenn’s poor husband, whom she kicked and knocked out while swing-dancing on their first date.

During this debrief, one student commented, “I totally didn’t see that coming” in relation to the events in Trevor’s salami story, which incited further discussion on the craft of humor writing. The discussion elicited viewpoints about how Trevor had led all of the students down a fairly mundane path in his writing in the beginning of his story, which made the unexpected appearance of the crazy German guy so unexpected and well-placed that the story was all the funnier because of it. It was at this point that the class really started looking at how authors form stories that make the audience laugh.
It’s All in the Delivery

The students in this class were participating in and enjoying our follow-up discussion on humor writing more than any other we’d had all semester because it was interesting, accessible, and applicable to their lives. Most of them have told a funny story before, or if they hadn’t yet done so successfully, they aspired to do so. Therefore, the class and I discussed things like comedic timing, language use, set-up, and delivery, which developed into a conversation about how the delivery of a story could make or break the audience reaction. This developed into a lesson beginning with my describing a friend of mine who would often tell stories that ended with, “I guess you had to be there” to a puzzled group of listeners.

This friend had a superhuman knack for making funny stories extraordinarily dull—case in point, the story she shared with me about her friend Jane. Jane had just recently found out that her current boyfriend had been the same boy who had accidentally flung a hockey stick that had hit her in the head when they were children. This had occurred about fifteen years earlier, when the two had been strangers. The story, as told by my friend, was not funny, not because the events weren’t funny but because the unskilled delivery of the story smothered the humor. To show a comparison, I then told my students a short anecdote that a colleague of mine, Brent, once told me about a weekend he had spent in the Midwest where he had been extremely bored in an area so flat that when he looked to the east he saw Monday coming. The masterful humorous storyteller, like most comedians, can spin a story so well that it doesn’t matter how tangential the humorous relaying becomes, in relation to the actual occurrences behind it. The audience appreciates the storyteller’s way with words and the ability, like Brent’s, to put a humorous light onto a fairly dull or everyday situation through skillful delivery.

Brent and his storytelling techniques became the inspiration for a small-group assignment whereby students were to become a “Brent,” and rescript Jane’s hockey stick story so it was no longer dull—their mission was to present the events of the story in the funniest way possible, with humorous tangents encouraged and creative liberties supported. Some fifteen minutes and many drafts later, the groups were ready to present their newly formed stories to the class. All of the stories were well received by the class but one story stood out as having gained the most laughter and appreciation, as well as an excellent follow-up discussion regarding writing styles. The students in this group had positioned the story’s events around nostalgic childhood photographs of Jane’s boyfriend playing hockey in the park with his childhood friends. Jane, upon seeing the photographs, commented on how the people and the settings in the photographs looked strangely familiar to her. At the close of the story, Jane’s boyfriend ended up hiding not only a look of dread, but also a photograph showing a little girl (who looked a lot like a young version of Jane) chasing after him with his own hockey stick. The class enjoyed this group’s humorous rendition because it generated a humorous response without exploiting Jane’s reaction to actually finding out the truth, as was the more obvious route that other groups had taken.
During this writing assignment, the students not only enjoyed themselves, but they also experimented, quite effortlessly, with different types of literary forms and varied delivery styles to manipulate how the audience received their stories. Thus the creation of the humorous story is characteristic of what takes place during writing of any sort, because humorous pieces, whatever the form, are “texts” just like any other literary work or academic piece. The appreciation of the humorous text, and thus the applicability of its use in the classroom, grows as students mature, both in their breadth of experiences and in their language development.

Humor in Language, Language in Humor

Humor and language development are linked in areas such as the ability to comprehend multiple meanings in expressions and to subsequently understand language with figurative, rather than literal, functions. Students are known to elaborate on varied ways to express themselves as they grow to appreciate how some texts have deeper meanings when the language is manipulated. As they mature in their ability to use and appreciate different linguistic forms and functions, students come across texts that are likewise filled with more complex and embedded language. As opposed to most academic discourse, however, the humor text is often more accessible and more effective as a vehicle for complex language experimentation because of the variance in creativity and the consistency in purpose (to achieve a laugh). Wielded effectively, the humor text can be used by the teacher to encourage students to combine ideas and language elements that are not usually associated with one another. Consequently, students think beyond their normal expressive boundaries to understand how else they can say what they want to say.

As do writers of all genres, the writer of the humor text needs to consider such things as cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality (De Beaugrande and Dressler, cited in Attardo and Chabanne). When creating humorous stories, even young children are known to experiment with narrative tools like suspenseful wait time and tension-building, elements of writing that we characterize as skilled techniques seen in great works of literature. Composition, both in the sense of structure and in the sense of creation, of the humorous text is no different from the composition of canonical texts or expository texts following traditional rhetorical styles. Therefore, teachers can integrate the humor text into the writing curriculum to facilitate the learning and internalizing of the following elements of skillful writing:

> writing with cohesion and coherence
> including a descriptive and detailed setup
> incorporating creative range (i.e., humorous tones on serious topics)
> analyzing the audience
> adapting tone and voice
> being concrete and concise
> giving a polished and appropriate presentation
Additionally, because humor writing also follows a writing process that involves creativity during conception, critical thought during development, skilled delivery during use, and audience analysis during refinement, the emphasis on process writing that many composition teachers adhere to can still be maintained when using the humor text.

However, the humor text can be seen as even more beneficial than the traditional classroom text given that humorous pieces generally include added elements of complex language manipulation employed by the writer for reasons that vary according to audience, purpose, situation, and style. These elements, which can take the form of words with multiple meanings, unconventional lexical use, or metaphoric representations, affect not only the writer’s presentation of ideas and information but the reader’s interpretation of the text as well. Unlike with most literary pieces that employ similar complex language manipulation, students can relate to and appreciate humorous text in the context of their interests and lives, as the retelling of humorous situations doesn’t seem far removed from the average student’s day-to-day exposures to language. For example, students would be far less put off by literary devices such as the metaphors, symbolism, or irony common in the popular “Yo’ mama is so dumb” jokes than they would when seeing the same devices used in Shakespearean or other literary texts. The complexity of the language used in humor texts is no longer something perceived as designed to confuse students, but rather as used to make them laugh. This is an important distinction for a student that can markedly affect the accessibility of the text and further allow student writers to journey to levels of language manipulation and writing abilities that they may have previously thought they could not reach.

Writing a Humorous Story vs. Writing a Story Humorously

The commonly held belief that humorous texts need always be based on humorous topics is not only false, but also severely limiting to the craft. When contemplating the use of the humorous text as a writing assignment, educators often ask me, “So what do I have the students write about?” The answer—anything they want. The one requirement, however, is that the writing involved is real. Topics and/or events should be based on experiences students have had or can directly relate to. Students’ humorous texts do not necessarily have to be nonfiction, but the topics and events should be important to students for there to be substance in the writing. Jules Feiffer, comedy writer and professor of humor writing, says that he shows the students in his Humor and Truth class the connection between the two by demonstrating how humor can help achieve both perspective on and distance from all of life’s events (Rogers). Contrary to what many people believe, the humor text, like any other text, can range in topic, delivery, and underlying emotion. Though a humorous audience response can be a major goal for the writer at the start of a humorous text, it does not always need to be the only emotion present, or even the emotion predominant at the end.
Thus it very well may be that a student ends up writing a humorous story about a very serious topic or portraying a poignant angle on a humorous situation. Some of my students’ greatest pieces were those that either had dark humor or a solemn topic that was written in a style so contrary to that solemnity, and delivered with such artfully crafted humor, that the piece was all the more powerful because of it. Students, like most people, are naturally drawn to humor. They show a genuine interest in figuring out how to make themselves and others laugh, whether it be to make light of an embarrassing situation, to cheer a friend up, or to just enjoy an ironic moment. The discovery of humor in all of life’s events, good and bad, marks the gifts of not only a skillful writer, but a thoughtful person. Our students’ lives are so full of humor that allowing them to bring this humor into the classroom creates another bridge between what they learn in school and what they experience in life. When students tell me they can’t write a humorous story because their lives are not funny, I am quick to give them examples of everyday occurrences that, when analyzed and presented in the right light, can be extremely funny.

Great examples of how everyday life events can be crafted into humorous texts are the commonly heard Bud Light “Real Men of Genius” commercials that salute and glorify the actions of the average man like the street-lane painter or the sports heckler at football games. The commercials are dripping with veiled sarcasm and witty, deadpan comments that give critical acclaim and lavish appreciation to these average men for their actions. My students enjoy discussing which of the commercials they like the best and often marvel at how the insignificant, unexciting actions of these men can be seen in such a humorous light. This is just one of many examples that can be used to show students how funny ordinary life can be.

Incorporating Humorous Texts into the Writing Class

Using this idea of humorous advertisements as a theme, teachers can begin a unit on humor writing by asking students to share with the class their favorite humorous commercials. From credit-card commercials to ads selling phones, the abundance of humor in advertisements clearly shows how the average person not only appreciates but also responds to humor. Companies would not spend millions of dollars if humor did not appeal to the public. My favorite high school economics teacher made that same claim regarding humor in advertising and had our class work in groups to create a commercial to market a never-before-seen product that we were to come up with. This was the most memorable of my high school learning experiences. I remember how one group came up with the aerosol can of fabric paint that could be used to make stains on clothing go away—by painting over them—and how another group marketed “the red brick” as no longer just a piece of a wall but a multidimensional tool that can be used as a water-saver when put into the toilet tank or as a “bell-ringer stopper” when thrown at those who ring the Salvation Army bells outside stores during the Christmas season.
Teachers can incorporate a similar memorable activity into their writing class, as I did, by having students write a humorous commercial script as one of their writing assignments. This commercial script will be in the form of a story that takes the reader through all the scenes in a funny commercial and the storyline behind it. Students are to use skillful writing techniques to make the audience “see” the events as they would in a commercial. I created the following ad slogan to model one possible way that this commercial script could be developed. In writing this ad slogan, I was inspired by the now-famous MasterCard commercials in which the first two lines describe things or events that have monetary value and can be purchased with a credit card while the last item is something so valuable that it is priceless. Following the consumer market’s current trend for appealing to humor, even this famous commercial has shifted its focus from the sentimental angle with which it was first introduced to the funny one that is now being used on t-shirts and in monologues by comedians who want to comment on current events. Likewise, I created this slogan to comment on a current event that we writing teachers constantly face:

Dictionary and thesaurus combo pack still in shrink-wrap: $25

Computer with uninstalled spell-checking software: $799

Love letter titled, “To my sweaty-pie,” from the anti-editing student: Priceless

After my students finished laughing, I asked them for ideas on what the scenes of a commercial based on these three lines would look like. Together, we built the framework for the script. Once we built the setup, described the characters, and made the embarrassing climax as mortifying as possible, we had our completed commercial script.

In this writing assignment, to encourage real writing from the students, I emphasize using life experiences as the inspiration for the commercials. Accordingly, one student wrote the script for a camcorder advertisement, basing it on real-life events. The premise of the commercial revolved around how the camcorder was necessary to capture memorable life events like seeing the family’s seventy-pound bulldog not swimming, but walking along the bottom of a pool, after having jumped into the water for the first time. The class delighted in the part of the commercial highlighting the impressive zoom feature of the camcorder, which was imperative in allowing the family to catch the facial expression of a perplexed dog startled at the sight of bubbles rising from his nose.

Students come to appreciate the complexity and skill involved in capturing what a humorous TV commercial conveys through their writing alone. This discovery aids the students as they work on using expository writing tools such as a strong setup, good development, and effective pacing. They additionally recognize the need for descriptive and precise language as well as cohesive and fluid sentence development in all the writing that they do. To further impress this point on them, as a follow-up activity the completed humorous script can be expanded or incorporated into a larger writing piece. For example, the storyline could be turned into the foundational plot of a larger creative piece, or used as an anecdote in an essay.
about a related topic. In doing this followup activity, students will see how different rhetorical styles, like humorous writing, can be used to supplement any written text.

With the growing popularity of college humor-writing classes and the use of humor texts in traditional writing classes, students are learning how to add skilled elements of humor to various writing pieces to enhance, enrich, and strengthen their writing. Such pieces can range in genre from science fiction to nonfiction, in format from news columns to memoirs, and in purpose from parodies to modern updates of classics. I am constantly and pleasantly surprised at the creative angles, different viewpoints, and insightful aspects the students come up with.

**Who Gets the Last Laugh?**

Many times, even if the humorous response isn’t received exactly as the student writer hopes, the writing involved is still very good, and the potential for improvement after revision quite great. During these occasional times when “I don’t get it” remarks arise from the audience, the noteworthy part is that the student writers, though disappointed, still show more interest in collecting feedback and revising their pieces than they do when working on traditional assignments like reports or essays. The peer-review and writing sessions in class are taken quite seriously with real interaction occurring among the students where it is not uncommon to hear students actively asking others to listen to what they just wrote. When I use the humor text in my writing classes, there is an overall level of effort, avid listening, and thoughtful response that I don’t often see during the writing process of other assignments I give.

Students will seek out peer feedback on whether or not particular sections or lines in their texts are funny, whether the reader “gets it” or not, and what can be done to make the text better. In writing assignments and activities that incorporate the humor text, students inherently see the need for audience and thus naturally seek out feedback during their writing and revising stages. Through their peers’ feedback, students may alter the pace, voice, and other elements that can improve the humor and delivery of their pieces. Sometimes the story’s essence changes altogether as writers take to heart the advice from the other students. I once had a student suggest to another student that the storyline of the writing assignment she was working on should be altered and told from the viewpoint of the chair being sat on by the many characters in the story. I thought that was a fantastic suggestion that I would never have thought of. The two students had a great time outlining the ways the story could change using the chair’s voice.

As it was in this case, students often take pleasure out of sharing and working on their humorous writing with their classmates, making them more open to the idea of the writing process as well as the sense of community that is vital to the writing class. These two factors are important in the development of effective writing skills and individual student expression. In the classes into which I have incor-
porated humorous texts, I have seen the students’ enthusiasm, and heard the students’ true voices, not only in their writing, but in their classroom interactions as well—sights and sounds that too often are missing from our classes. In addition to seeing the final writing products develop and improve because of the revising, it is also rewarding (from a teacher’s standpoint) to see students contemplating, writing, participating in feedback, and editing . . . all with smiles on their faces.

Conclusion

As writing instructors, we want our students to figure out what it is they want to say before reflecting on how they want their readers to react to it, so they can, in turn, find the most fitting ways to express themselves. Using the humor text in the writing class allows students to become familiar with different ways to look at and present ideas, giving them the tools to write for purpose and audience. While writing can help students better understand themselves and the world around them, humorous writing helps students find different ways to express and generate response to this newfound understanding, whatever the topic. Moreover, the use of the humor text can encourage students to dig deeper, emotionally and intellectually, as it continually acts as both motivator and reward throughout the writing process.

Works Cited


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