

## Humour and Joke Writing for the Young at Heart®



*Laughter is an instant vacation.*

- Milton Berle

*Jokes are the product of playing around with language to see what is possible and what happens. Playing is fun: it results in delight.*

- Debra Aarons

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## Introductory Course Outline

Note: Every class is tailored to the interests of the group and features a variety of activities and exercises. In many cases, we alternate between passive activities (e.g., watching short comedy clips from the Golden Age of TV comedy, like *I Love Lucy* or *Dick Van Dyke*) and active ones (e.g., exercises that introduce participants to pun making or simple jokes).

In an introductory 60- or 90-minute class, we typically cover the following topics (if time doesn't permit, we can carry over some topics to the next session):

1. *Introduction to humour*: To break the ice, we usually introduce participants to a few questions around the theme of humour and laughter that we might not have reflected on before. What is humour? Why is it so widespread? What purposes does it serve in everyday life? How does our sense of humour evolve as we age? Are there physical, mental or psychological benefits to laughter and humour use? Can we improve our sense of humour as we grow older?\*
2. *What's funny*: Humour styles vary from one person to the next, but most people react positively to a wide range of (non-aggressive) joke forms. First, we'll look at some surefire ways most people can get a laugh (from pure exaggeration, to narrative joke telling to pun making to self deprecating statements). Second, we'll examine a whole range of devices people can use to create verbal humour beyond the standard quips, one-liners and puns (e.g., malapropisms, oxymorons). We'll also look at what just about every form of verbal humour has in common.
3. *The history of comedy*: Humour changes with the times but the mechanisms of humour have remained relatively stable over the decades – from the vaudeville gags of Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Milton Berle and George Burns to modern comics like Buddy Hackett, Rodney Dangerfield and Jerry Seinfeld. We'll look at a few of these mechanisms and see what they have in common.
4. *Practical exercises*: Producing humour requires only basic language skills and a playful attitude. Anyone can learn to write a joke and make others laugh. There are many possible exercises, but let's start by looking at three: i) How to write a pun; ii) How to write a one-liner; and iii) How to create a witticism by twisting around conventional idiomatic expressions.

\*The answer is: Yes, we can. Numerous studies have shown measurable improvements in active and passive humour abilities in seniors in as few as four weeks. The best results are obtained when participants follow a weekly program focused on developing positive humour habits.

## A. Introduction to Humour

To get the ball rolling, here are a few guiding thoughts that I introduce to stimulate some reflection on humour and laughter:

- Humour and laughter are a core feature of humans: infants begin to laugh in response to the actions of other people at about four months of age and seniors spend as much time producing and responding to humour as their younger peers (children, adolescents and young adults).
- Laughter is pervasive (much more than crying) and the vast majority of laughter occurs in spontaneous social interactions between people in ordinary social settings rather than in response to canned jokes (i.e., in conversations between spouses, close friends, neighbours, coworkers, business associates, store clerks and customers, doctors and patients, and even complete strangers standing in line at a bank, etc.). In fact, laughter does not require humour or jokes; it only requires the presence of another person.
- Laughter appears to have originated in social play and has been linked to primate play signals. Research aside, our experience confirms that people like to monkey around and generally take great pleasure in distorting words and ideas. In a nutshell, humour is about playing with (and subverting) words and ideas.
- There are many reasons why people use humour, some positive and others less so: to establish and maintain relationships; to impress others or get attention; to lessen conflict; to enhance one's self image at the expense of others; to deal with life stress and anxiety; and to poke fun at conventional thinking. But in general, humour use is so appealing (and enduring) because the vast majority of people never tire of monkeying around and generally enjoy provoking mirth in others.
- Our sense of humour evolves over our lifespan, and overall, tends to become less aggressive and more focused on supporting social relationships. That's why a sense of humour is so often cited by seniors as the key to well-being.
- Regardless of our personal preferences, there is ample evidence which shows that humour improves physical, mental and psychological health, and promotes a positive worldview. It has been considered as the most natural and cost-free method of reducing stress, anxiety and tension. It just takes a little practice.
- Humour skills can improve with age and anyone can develop a better sense of humour. Just ask George Burns!

## B. Practical exercise

Note: Sample lessons and exercises for the What's Funny and History of Comedy components can be provided upon request. In the following, we present one group exercise that encourages participants to reflect on common forms of expression (and ways to turn them into humour).

Here's the premise of this exercise: "Old age? I think it's partly your genes," says Carl Reiner. "And it's your environment. Also, if you have a funny bone; if you grew up in a family with a sense of humor." This pearl of wisdom is just one take on why some of us are blessed with living exceptionally long lives. In truth, no one really knows for sure why some people live to be centenarians and beyond and why others do not (is it the genes, good eating, a frugal life, religious obedience?).

Your guess is as good as mine. Let's pretend we've reached the ripe old age of 105 and a reporter drops by our home to ask us what the secret is to our prodigious longevity.

If we want to put a comic twist on our answer, we need to find a way to replace the usual hackneyed thoughts (i.e., Carl Reiner's idea) about longevity with something imaginative, non-sensical or just plain counterintuitive. Here are a few gems:

*What's the secret to your remarkably long life?*

1. I reckon it's because I haven't died yet.
2. I always tried to imagine that I was a turtle.
3. Ask the manager at the LCBO.
4. I still have a mortgage.
5. No secret, but I guess I'm a great procrastinator.
6. Who knows. Apparently, God lost my file.
7. I don't know about a secret but passing away would wreck my image.
8. The secret? I always believed in the Bible. After all, I wrote the introduction.
9. Well, to be honest, it's because at my age flowers scare me.
10. No peer pressure.
11. Sorry, it's a secret.
12. I do alcohol shock therapy once a year. (Reporter then asks: "My heavens, how much do you drink?"). Answer: Not a drop.

Now let's try a few of our own. Let's brainstorm as a group to find some common ideas about longevity and try to turn them upside down and twist them inside out. It's easier than you think and it will make you feel much younger and smarter!