

## 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

### Class 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 the introductory one-hour class, we will cover the following main 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 will 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*: Everyone is familiar with narrative jokes and one-liners. But did you know that there are an almost limitless number of ways of playing around with words and ideas to produce humour? Ever heard of paragrams, palindromes, daffynitions, spoonerisms, malapropisms, coinages, backronyms? Beyond that, any deviation or benign violation of conventional expression is liable to be interpreted as humour use.
3. *The history of comedy*: Humour changes with the times but the mechanisms of humour production 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.

## 1. Introduction to Humour

To get the ball rolling, here are a few guiding thoughts that I will 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!

## 2. What's funny?

The second part of our introduction will focus on what all humour has in common (hint: some form of basic incongruity).

There are countless ways to use language to humorous ends – without having to find ingenious ways to play with words (just think of Syd Caser's dialect comedy or Buddy Hackett's storytelling; or even Jerry Seinfeld's amusing vignettes of daily life). Just demonstrating good self-awareness or deviating from expected conversational norms will get you a laugh too!

But for most standard jokes, we can almost always observe some violation or deviation from logic, sense, reality or practicable actions. In short, jokes poke their finger in the eye of common sense – and it's that poking that we recognize as humour. In other words, the joke starts in the world, then leaves it! That's the difference between:

*My friend tried to quit smoking cigarettes by always keeping a toothpick in his mouth, but it didn't work and he's still smoking a pack a day.*

And

*My friend tried to quit smoking cigarettes by always keeping a toothpick in his mouth; he died six months ago of Dutch Elm disease.*

Or

*My friend wanted to get a personalized licence plate but found it was too expensive, so he just kept his old plate.*

And

*My friend wanted to get a personalized licence plate but found it was too expensive, so he just had his name changed to VLB 293.*

Or

*I have friends who are Siamese twins; they lead normal and productive lives.*

And

*I have friends who are Siamese twins; they just moved to England so the other one could drive.*

Many joke forms just play on ideas rather than on some specific language feature. There are lots of these "idea" jokes: *When I was younger, I always wanted to be a somebody. Now I realize I should have been more specific.*

But when it comes to humorous effects arising from playing on some language feature, there are endless possibilities – from single words (hallapalooza!), to puns, whacky definitions, mispronunciations, word order ambiguities and outrageous hyperboles. And a million things in between!

### 3. History of Comedy

This activity will allow us to appreciate how stable comedic joke forms are (despite changes in the themes).

Last week my daughter asked me: *"Are there more wheels in the world or doors?"*

In this intentionally quirky question lies the heart of joke making: Absurdity.

The history of comedy is one where absurdity reigns in one form or another. And we can look at a few historical examples. Let's take one of my favourites: That's how we get to my favourite *A woman goes to see a psychiatrist and says, "Doctor, you have to help me. My husband thinks he's a refrigerator." The doctor says, "That seems like an innocent enough delusion. I think it'll go away." The lady replies, "I hope so, because he sleeps with his mouth open and the little light is keeping me awake at night."*

Such jokes span the ages and all display the same forms of spurious, twisted logic (I will provide examples).

At the same time, joke structures evolve slowly. Remember Henny Youngman from the 1950s?

Here's one of his classics:

*My wife and I have been married for 60 years. Some people us ask the secret of our long marriage. We take time to go to a restaurant two times a week. A little candlelight, dinner, soft music and dancing. She goes Tuesdays, I go Fridays.*

Fast forward 70 years. And look at the gags delivered by famous British comic Jimmy Carr in Ottawa last month:

*After 20 years of marriage, my wife lost interest in intimacy. So I went to a doctor who gave me a pill, but warned me that was still experimental. He tells me to slip it into her mashed potatoes at dinner, so that night, I did just that.*

*About a week later, I went back at the doctor, where said, "Doc, the pill worked great! I put it in the potatoes like you said! It wasn't five minutes later that she jumped up, raked all the food and dishes onto the floor, and the fireworks started to fly. Boy it was like our wedding night all over again."*

*The doctor says, "I'm sorry, we didn't realize the pill was that strong! The clinic will be glad to pay for any damages." "Nah," I said, "That's okay. We're never going back to that restaurant anyway."*

Pretty close, no?

#### 4. Practical exercises

Time permitting, this activity will allow participants to ease into the joke writing world by introducing them to a few basic joke forms, using simple exercises (puns, one-liners and witticisms).

##### i) Puns:

Puns get a bad rap but are actually complex joke forms that involve playing on the ambiguities and overlaps between sounds, forms and meanings. They're a staple of kids riddles (*How did the baby tell her mom her diaper was wet? She sent her a pee-mail*). There are *homophones* (words with same sounds but different meanings) and *homonyms* (same spelling but different meanings) – and a million variants in between. Here are a few:

- The past, present, and future walk into a bar. **It was tense.**
- I went to a new mechanic. **They came highly wreck-a-mended.**
- Becoming a vegetarian is a big **missed steak.**
- Two antennas got married. The ceremony wasn't much, but the **reception** was excellent.
- Why did the monk refuse novocaine when he had his tooth pulled? He wanted to **transcend dental medication.**
- I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. **It's impossible to put down.**
- My roommates suspect I'm stealing their kitchen utensils. But that's a **whisk** I'm willing to take.
- I decided to get rid of my spine. **It was holding me back.**
- Knowing how to pick locks has **opened a lot of doors for me.**
- Getting paid to sleep would be my **dream job.**
- Velcro... **what a rip-off.**
- I gave away my dead batteries, **no charge.**
- Surly gardeners are **rough around the hedges.**
- This girl thought she recognized me from vegetarian club, **but I've never met herbivore.**
- Need an ark? **I Noah guy.**
- My wife told me to stop speaking in numbers. **But I didn't 1 2**

Let's try a few:

1. Yesterday a clown held the door open for me. **It was such a nice** \_\_\_\_\_.

**Hint: What's another name for clown? Sounds like a word for an act of appreciation?**

2. You should wear glasses while doing math. **It improves** \_\_\_\_\_.

Hint: What is one basic mathematical operation? What are eye glasses intended to improve?

3. Did you hear about the man who lost his left side? **He's all** \_\_\_\_\_.

Hint: What is another word to say someone is okay? What is the opposite of left?

4. I'm glad I learned sign language. It's really \_\_\_\_\_.

Hint: What body part is used in signing? What is a colloquial word for practical?

5. To the guy who invented Zero, **thanks for** \_\_\_\_\_!

Hint: What is synonym of zero?

## *ii) One-liners*

Formulaic one-liners are as old as comedy itself. For generations, comedy writers have relied on formulas to write these types of joke. They help the gag writer because they provide a head start on the joke – you only need to fill in the blank! Here's one classic formula exploited by the Old Masters:

### **You know you're getting old...**

1. You know you're getting old when the candles cost more than the cake. – Bob Hope
2. You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoelaces and wonder what else you could do while you're down there. – George Burns
3. You know you're getting old when your actions creak louder than your words. – Milton Berle

Now here's a few more. Let's see if we can identify the right punchline:

4. At the breakfast table you hear snap, crackle, pop and...

- a) ... it's Rice Krispies
- b) ... you're not eating cereal.
- c) ... it's a new type of cereal.

5. Your back goes out...

- a) ... but your spouse sweeps the floor.
- b) ... and it hurts.
- c) ... but you stay home.

6. When happy hour....

- a) ... is a nap.
- b) ... only involves a single drink.
- c) ... is every two hours.

7. Your idea of weight lifting is...

- a) ... using light weights.
- b) ... shifting the TV around.
- c) ... standing up.

### iii) *Proverbs and other cliches...*

In theory, proverbs (or axioms, old saws, sayings, or adages) are wise sayings that can provide a person with answers to several questions about life (and make you sound sophisticated). In reality, they're hackneyed cliches that perpetuate simple-minded ideas that offer no useful guidance. So let's satirize and twist them around to make people laugh!

#### **1. Money can't buy happiness.**

You may have great wealth but it can't you get a genuine loving relationship that enhances and sustains your life.

Possible response:                      ...But it does improve your bargaining position.  
    ...But poverty buys absolutely nothing.

#### **2. It's a small world**

*The world may appear large, but it sure is surprising to learn how people or events are connected.*

Possible response:                      ...But I wouldn't wan to have to paint it.



### **3. You only live once.**

Expresses the idea that human life on earth is finite and you'd better make the most of it.

Possible response: ...I've heard that in another life.

### **4. Better late than never.**

It is better for someone to be late than never to arrive at all. It can also mean it is better to do a task (or a good deed) late than never doing it at all.

Possible response: ...Not if you have to visit my mother-in-law.

Let's try our own, It's easy once you know the underlying mechanism!