

English Composition

Exploring, Analyzing, Researching Humor



Course Description: Everyone likes to laugh. All of us do not, however, always agree on what is or is not funny. This disagreement arises because both funniness and laughter relate to the *concept* of humor. Pausing to think about what humor is raises questions about who we are and about our personal values and beliefs. Investigating the nature of humor opens pathways of inquiry into what our culture and society values, into the nature of being human, and about the value of humor itself. In this course, you will encounter theories of humor, examine its function in your life, society, and culture, and consider its value in all three. You will respond to the various ideas and arguments that the writers, artists, and cartoonists express. You will also research, analyze, and compose arguments regarding the various aspects of humor that intrigue you.

Required Text

- *Funny* Catherine Cucinella, ed. Fountainhead Press, 2014
- A rhetoric (addressing research, argument, and/or analysis) of the instructor's choosing

Assignments and Grade Distributions

- **Short Writing Assignments, 10%**
 - Both in-class responses to and homework assignments based on “Explore,” “Invent,” and “Compose” prompts in *Funny*. These short assignments provide opportunities for students to develop the writing and conceptual skills necessary for the semester's more complex major writing assignments and projects.
- **Explaining the Concept of Humor, 10 %**
 - Students will explain what humor is and convey the significance of their explanation. Students may incorporate revised portions of this paper into their final exploratory argument/analysis essay.
- **Rhetorical Analysis of a Visual Text, 10%**
 - Students will analyze the rhetoric of a political or editorial cartoon, specifically addressing the persuasiveness of the humor and its value.
- **Rhetorical Analysis of a Written Text, 15%**

- Students will rhetorically analyze a humorous/satirical piece of writing, specifically identifying the type of humor the writer uses as well as what the piece suggests about humor in society.
- **Argument Essay on the Social Value of Humor and/or Its Ethical Use, 25%**
 - Students will write an argument essay expressing whether they agree with the many writers in *Funny* who believe humor holds an important and valued place in our society, or students may write an argument essay expressing whether they agree with the writers who argue that comedians, humorists, and satirists must “use” humor ethically and responsibly. Students must use relevant strategies of argument to support their positions, and they should refer to one or more of the readings. Students may incorporate revised portions of this paper in their final exploratory argument/analysis essay.
- **Exploratory Argument and Analysis Research Essay on an Aspect of Humor, 30%**
 - Students will investigate an aspect of humor raised by one or more the readings. Using the readings as a starting point, students will do additional research in order to articulate their understanding of the issue/topic, to position themselves in the critical conversations about this aspect of humor, and to make clear the larger significance of their argument, exploration, and analyses.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Unit 1: Defining Humor and How it Functions

Week 1:

Readings: Introduction to the course; “The Funny Thing about Humor Is that It Is Really Really Important!” (pp 1-13); “Three Popular Memes” (pp 13-16)

Assignments Due: Narrative based on Compose page 12

Week 2:

Readings: “The Comic in General—the Comic Element in Forms and Movement—Expansive Force of the Comic” (pp 17-20); “Early Conceptions of Humor in Religion, Medicine, Philosophy, and Psychology” (pp 21-28); “A Big Mystery: Why Do We Laugh?” (pp 29-31); *from a rhetoric chapter on the writing process* **Assignments Due:** draft of group response based on Collaborate page 28

Week 3:

Readings: “Health Care Savvy: Heart Benefits of a Hearty Laugh” (pp 33-34); “Scientists Hint at Why Laughter Feels So Good” (pp 35-37); “Laughter as a Form of Exercise” (pp 39-41); “Humor and Physical Health” (pp 43-50)

Assignments Due: short 1-2 page essay based on Explore page 50

Week 4:

Readings: “The Social Value of Humor” (pp 51-56); “The Value of Humor” (pp 57-66); “The Art of the Perfect Prank” (pp 79-92); “The Joke’s on Whom?” (pp 83-84); *from a rhetoric chapter on identifying assumptions, values, and arguments*

Assignments Due: short group response based on Collaborate page 56; **Assignment #1: Explaining the Concept of Humor**

Unit 2: The Politics and Power of Humor

Week 5:

Readings: “Not Just for Laughs: Why Humor Can Be a Powerful Campaign Tool” (pp 85-87); “Political Humor’s Hysterical History” (pp 89-93); “For Cartoonists Who Cover Obama: Four More Ears” (pp 95-102); “Anger as Paper Reprint Cartoons of Muhammad” (pp 103-05); “Political Humor and Its Diss-Content” (pp 107-11); *from a rhetoric chapter on rhetorically analyzing visual images*

Assignments Due: group political cartoon/paper based on Collaborate page 102; annotated item based on Explore page 105

Week 6:

Readings: “A Modest Proposal” (pp 113-20); “My Amendment” (pp 121-25); “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart” (pp 127-36); *from a rhetoric chapter on rhetorical analysis (rhetorical appeals/fallacies)*

Assignments Due: Assignment #2: Rhetorical Analysis of a Visual Text;

Week 7:

Readings: “Art by Banksy” (pp 137-39); “The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth” (pp 141-50) “When Jokes Go too Far” (pp 151-54); *from a rhetoric chapter on writing rhetorical analysis*

Assignments Due: profile on Banksy based on Explore page 139; short essay based on Compose page 150

Unit 3: The Humorist’s Role, Identity, Society, and Culture

Week 8:

Readings: “Why We Love Louis CK?—His Painful Honesty” (pp 187-88); “In the Tastes of Young Men, Humor Is Most Prized, A Survey Finds” (155-57); “Blondjokes.com: The New Generation” (pp 159-65); “The Humor Gap” (pp 167-73); “Dear Internet” (pp 175-79); “Males versus Females, Gays versus Straights, and the Varieties of Gender Humor” (pp 181-86); *from a rhetoric chapter on audience and argument*

Assignments Due: summary and presentation based on Collaborate page 165

Week 9:

Readings: “Technology” (pp 205-10); “Selfie’s Word of the Year Acceptance Speech” (pp 211-13); *from a rhetoric chapter on research*

Assignments Due: Assignment #3: Rhetorical Analysis of a Written Text; 2 response based on Explore page 213

Week 10:

Readings: “Ethnic Humor’s No Joke for Amateur” (pp 189-91); “Is Ethnic and Racial Humor Dangerous” (pp 191-93); “The Genius of ‘Chappelle’s Show’ 10 Years Later” (201-03);

Assignments Due: Short paper based on Explore page 203.

Week 11:

Readings: “Revisiting Mel Brooks and Richard Pryor’s Subversively Brilliant Racial Satire *Blazing Saddles*, 40 Years Later” (pp 195-99); **View in class: *Blazing Saddles***

Assignments Due: opinion piece based on Collaborate page 199; proposal with annotated bibliography for final paper;

Unit 4: Composing, Workshopping, Revising

Week 12:

Readings: *from a rhetoric chapter on revision*

Assignments Due: Assignment #4: Argument Essay on the Social Value of Humor and/or Its Ethical Use. Bring assignments 1-3 with my feedback (I will have your proposal and annotated bib for you); we will consider how you might begin revising your previous work to develop your exploration, arguments, and ideas for your final paper. We’ll be in a computer lab; however, feel free to bring your laptop.

Week 13:

Readings: *from a rhetoric chapter working with sources, incorporating evidence*

Assignments Due: Print and bring two sources from your annotated bibliography that you’re pretty sure you’ll be using in your paper; have these sources fully annotated—marked up in the margins, underlined, highlighted! We’ll be in a computer lab; however, feel free to bring your laptop as we’ll be doing some summarizing and synthesizing of these sources.

Week 14:

Assignments Due: draft of final paper (min. 6 pages—3 copies for peer-review workshop); you will be workshopping your papers all class meetings this week; each peer-review workshop will focus on different aspects of revision, so come prepared!

Week 15:

Assignments Due: 5-minute oral presentation of your final paper; final paper due during finals week