

Humor in Scholarly Journal Articles: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

By Ronald A. Berk*

WARNING: This article contains humor, which may not be appropriate for some of you, particularly if you have the sense of humor of a grapefruit. Reader discretion is advised. You will miss this trailblazing, earth-shattering, possibly Pulitzer-prize-winning contribution to the literature. However, that's okay. To accommodate your "serious" perspective, this article is *Closed Captioned for the Humor-Impaired*. After each attempt at jocularly, the punch line will be explained in () so that you can laugh along with the rest of us.

Introduction

Despite the extinction of dinosaurs, *Jurassic World* continues to release an array of genetically-engineered hybrid mutants. Their mutations enable them to head-butt through brick walls like one of the Three Stooges on crack and crush a car underfoot like a soda can. Those feats are amazing.

In contrast, *Academic World* does none of that. It simply continues its prehistoric tradition of "publish or perish" with no mutations, although there are occasional head-butts in faculty meetings. Colleges and research universities still require a vitae packed with scholarly publications for promotion and tenure review. Real dinos have perished, but this requirement has not. Perhaps it is time to examine this requirement to consider a needed mutation, not in the substance of the publications but their form.

Academic writing has its own history and traditions. This section will identify the milestones along with sources for writing and readers' perspectives on that genre. The remainder of the article describes how to use humor to boost the

readers' interest and serotonin levels in reading academic publications.

History of Academic Writing

The current form is buttoned-up, super-serious, scientific language, written in the third person and often in passive voice. Formal attire is required—no T-shirts or flip-flops. That form is the style all of us inherited from the mid-1600s, spearheaded by the Royal Society of London's journal *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. Physicist Robert Boyle (1661) invented the "methods-and-results" scientific format, and preacher Thomas Sprat (1667) founded the Society. Together they established the guidelines for scientific style: *plain language with an emphasis on clarity*. These guidelines became the gold standard for over 350 years, give-or-take a day or two. Anything that interferes with the clear presentation of ideas and easy understanding, such as figures of speech, humor, and playfulness, is judged inappropriate, unacceptable, and evil. Words or images that are intended to entertain the reader to stimulate interest are strictly prohibited and subject to prosecution on *Law & Order*.

Sources for Academic Writing

The above practice has become inexorably the essential ingredient in publication guidelines. Without even doing research on Amazon, I dug up more than 25 books about academic writing that were published over the past decade and are

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applicable to any field (Bailey, 2015; Barros, 2016; Behrens & Rosen, 2018; Belcher, 2009; Butler, 2007; Claudio, 2016; Day & Gastel, 2016; Dollahite & Haun, 2011; EssayShark, 2017; Goodson, 2016; Graff & Birkenstein, 2016; Heard, 2016; Hofmann, 2016; Jensen, 2017; Katz, 2009; Miller-Cochran, Stamper, & Cochran, 2016; Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Parija & Kate, 2017; Rocco, Hatcher, & Associates, 2011; Savage & Mayer, 2012; Schimel, 2012; Silvia, 2007; Singh & Lukkarila, 2017; Stevens, 2018; Sword, 2012, 2017; Thonney, 2015; Tulley, 2018).

Other books have popped up in specific subject areas, such as the humanities (Hayot, 2014), biology and medicine (Joubert & Rogers, 2015; Matthews & Mathews, 2007; Rogers, 2007; Taylor, 2015, 2018), and social and behavioral sciences (Singh & Lukkarila, 2017). Additional popping involved a book intended specifically for graduate students (Swales & Feak, 2012) and another, which is gluten-free, to prepare your brain for writing (Janzer, 2016). There are also classic sources by Boice (1990), Becker (2007), and Zinsser (2006), as well as several style manuals. They all espouse and perpetuate the gold standard.

Readers' Perspectives

What is the problem with this style? (*HINT: It is BOOORING!*) From the readers' perspectives, the authors' of recent articles about academic writing listed a surfeit of unpleasant adjectives to capture the affective impact of this genre: boring, dull, dry, deadly, dreary, stodgy, gag-in-the-throat, formulaic, jargony, unnecessarily complex, static, unchanging, sterile, clinical, knotty, remote, insular, technical, insipid, turgid, tedious, colorless, specialized, forbidding, clannish, impersonal, unintelligible, and SOOO boring (Antonova, 2012; Freeman, 2017; Heard, 2014; Rothman, 2014). What did I miss? You queried: "Are these descriptors the price you have to pay for clarity?" Pretty much. Maybe it is time to tarnish the gold slightly.

Kristof (2014) noted that academic programs had fostered a "culture that glorifies arcane unintelligibility while disdain[ing] impact and audience. This culture of exclusivity is then transmitted to the next generation through the publish-or-perish tenure process. Rebels are too often crushed or driven away."

The message is clear: Academic writing in journal articles and books is an anesthetic waiting to take effect. Reading those publications can produce drooling as you doze and eventually induce a coma. If you have mild sleep problems, sleep apnea, or skip around the country-side at night with Dracula, reading a typical journal article in your field could be the antidote. A single article or chapter is faster acting and more powerful than Melatonin and most other over-the-counter and under-the-counter sleep aids. You could lose consciousness in fewer than 10 minutes; only IV anesthetics like Versed, Propofol, and Preparation H[®] work faster. In other words, reading a journal article provides a twofer: It knocks you out and prevents skipping.

Why Use Humor in Academic Writing?

That boldface heading is the central conundrum of this article. Beyond the incontrovertible evidence underlying the above, how do the sources on academic writing address the use of humor? With one exception, they do not. Heard (2014, 2016) argued for "small touches of whimsy, humanity, humour, and beauty...functional writing punctuated with occasional nuggets of playfulness or glints of beauty" (p. 70). He emphasized achieving the primary goal of clear scientific writing, but also offering pleasure to your readers and encouraging colleagues to do the same in their writing.

Is academic writing so sacrosanct that it cannot be embellished with a little levity? The entertainment quotient I propose here is not on the level of watching Ethan Hunt in the latest installment of *Mission: Impossible—Fall Down* doing perilous parachute maneuvers, dangling from helicopters, scraping his way up a cliff, and running at warp speed over London rooftops. I aim for only the rooftop playfulness. That is my mission, should I choose to accept it.

Research Evidence

Since humor in scientific journals and books is virtually nonexistent (Bartlett, 2014), how much research evidence exists on the effects of humor on readers of academic writing? (*Spoiler Alert: None!*) Only recently has there been an attempt to study the linguistic features of humor used by students in their academic writing (Skalicky, Berger, Crossley,

& McNamara, 2016). However, for you “doubting Rons” out there and others, there are tankers of humor research about the individual psychological, physiological, and educational benefits (see brief review by Berk, 2014, and Berk, 2002, 2003; Martin, 2006; McGee, 2010) in other contexts.

If you use humor in teaching, training, and speaking to deliver serious content, why shouldn't you use it in your writing? Play with the minds of your readers by using colorful words and phrases, especially figures of speech, to create strong, memorable images. In addition to providing high- or even medium-octane entertainment and a pulsating text, these techniques have other benefits. It is possible to extrapolate from the research base that there may be several potential cognitive and psychological effects of humor on readers as they plod through a scientific publication:

1. Improves overall mental functioning
2. Facilitates communication
3. Arouses attention and engagement
4. Improves understanding, retention, and memory
5. Improves problem-solving
6. Relaxes readers
7. Encourages open-mindedness
8. Facilitates a positive and cooperative mood
9. Increases interaction or connection between writer and reader
10. Reduces the negative emotional consequences of stress, anxiety, and tension

Resistance and Pushback

When you insert humor into your article, what will happen to you? Will you experience rejection, punishment, or deportation? Becoming a humor writer is not your comeuppance, but there are real consequences.

Publications redacted for humor. If you consider infusing humor in a journal article, what could possibly go wrong? Cracking the “serious code” has its consequences. The conflation of serious text with humor is a violation of the traditional standard.

The reviewers and editor of a scholarly journal will typically view those insertions as *distracting from the serious content* and *not appropriate for the journal*. Here are a few comments I received that represent those views:

- “Although this manuscript was cleverly written

and somewhat amusing, its basic silliness does not lend itself to publication in the journal.”

- “I found the flippant style gimmicky, distracting, and inappropriate for the journal.”
- “If there is ever a *National Lampoon* issue of the journal, we might reconsider.”
- “It was entertaining reading, but it was more suited to a magazine than a journal.”
- “The author has tried to write a spritely piece; what comes across is a paper that is overly ‘cute’.”
- “I think the paper has an extremely clever way of presenting the overview, but that it needs to be toned down.”

Occasionally, a comment such as, “It is a well-written breath of fresh air on the topic,” slips into one of the reviews.

If your article's substance is deemed worthy of publication, the editor may request that you remove all of the “inappropriate” language that may divert attention from the substance. This request is not retribution for using humor; it is a reprieve for not using it. You will be given the option to resubmit, and the editor will reconsider the manuscript. In other words, submit a redacted version omitting all elements in your writing that you perceive would improve the enjoyment of your contribution to your readers and, maybe, just maybe, the paper will be accepted. Here are some editors' encouraging words:

- “If you rewrite the paper without the use of the metaphor, we would reconsider publication.”
- “If you remove all of the ‘colorful’ language and attempts at humor... we would be very interested in publishing the resulting manuscript.”
- “If the article were revised in a more appropriate style, I think it would be worth publishing.”

Journal articles. So what are your options? You have two: (1) bite the bullet, and submit the redacted manuscript, or (2) submit the original version to another journal with the hope that new reviewers will be more accepting. The pivotal question is: “How funny is your paper?” No, wait. Wrong question. The right question is: “How important is the substantive contribution to be published without the humor?” Usually, that answer affirms the quality of your work, and you acquiesce

by picking option 1. There are very few editors who will work with you and accept some of your humor material. Once you find any, stick with them.

Books. Books can provide more flexibility depending on the editor, readership, and topic. Reviewers usually come in with responses similar to those for the unredacted article manuscripts. Editors will still present the ultimatum that you remove all humor. That rejection and request by the editor represent a gut punch to your integrity as a writer. Telling you to eviscerate your book manuscript of all humor is like telling Peter Benchley, “I really like *Jaws*, but lose the shark.” Not that I am comparing your book to *Jaws*, but humor is what makes your writing funnier than *Jaws* and distinguishes it from the rest of the pack on “serious” academic topics.

Some publishers and editors will negotiate about the form of your writing. If you build up a readership that expects humor in your writing on serious topics, the humor can be a viable factor for marketing. It distinguishes your work and feeds into a broader readership. The narrow scholarly readership base is the most restrictive and resistant.

Promotion and tenure review. How will humor set with your P & T committee? Do S & M come to mind? Will there be a reprisal for the crime of humor? Just kidding. Your colleagues on that committee may not even know about the humor unless they actually read your publications.

It is possible that the humor in your articles may bias the committee’s review and lead them to question the quality or legitimacy of your work. If the humor appears in only a few articles, that bias should not be a concern. Committee members are not going to Sherlock through every article to find the humor. It is your body of work that counts. Further, your substantive contributions and the journals in which they are published carry considerably more weight in the review process than a few brilliant jokes covertly embedded in your text. Unless you broadcast your humor on social media and billboards the size of *Sharknado* or conduct research and write articles on humor (as I do), you should not have a problem. Your publications along with evidence of teaching effectiveness, research grants, service, practice, and money-laundering activities should razzle-dazzle your committee.

(WARNING: It is time. We are about to enter *Humor World*. There you will learn to go rogue as

a humor writer. Secrets to writing humor will be revealed along with types of humor and buckets of examples. If you proceed, the information could change your life, at least for a few minutes. Need to bail? Do it now. It could be scary, but not creepy like the Hannibal Lecter-style anti-biting muzzle. After you apply this material to your writing, your kids may think you are semi-funny, but your significant other and emotional-support weasel will probably run away. Just sayin’.)

Writing Humor 101

As a budding humor writer, where do you begin? It is like eating a water buffalo. Where do you take the first bite? Writing humor requires a slightly different skill set than scientific writing, but it is not as difficult as demonstrating the “theory of relativity” with *Sesame Street* Muppets. You do not have to be a wordsmith. Consider that Shakespeare never went to school or even spoke English, yet he wrote a bunch of Pulitzer-Prize winning comedies, including *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and the original version of *West Side Story*. These plays were written just in the nick of time, with only a century to spare before the Boyle-Sprat scientific guidelines hit the cobblestone streets of London.

Certain basic techniques with examples can propel you into “A whole new world” that is so much fun. This section is all about propelling. I will describe (1) humor resources, (2) humor infrastructure, (3) humor subtext, (4) placement of humor, and (5) readership characteristics.

Humor Resources

There are several books on writing funny and comedy (Carter, 2001; Dikkers, 2014; Kaplan, 2013; Perret, 2007; Shatz & Helitzer, 2016; Vorhaus, 1994) and blogs (Bunting, n.d.; Elden, 2015; Grubb, 2016; Jasheway, 2012, 2016; Rizvi, 2017; Shleyner, 2018), written seriously, that are focused on prose, TV/web video, movies, audio/podcast, stage, and street art. Prose is defined as dull discourse or commonplace expression. Humor in prose (fiction) can be found in publications like *The Onion* (also see Skalicky *et al.*, 2016). There is even a course titled “Humor: Serious Business” offered at the Stanford University School of Business with 18 topics on the syllabus, but not one of them indicates how to write with humor in the otherwise serious

text (Aaker & Bagdonas, 2018). Other universities with courses on humor also neglect this topic.

These sources are not very helpful. Writing humor that is sprinkled throughout serious nonfiction, scientific text is not the same as writing comedy for sitcoms, stand-up routines, *The Harvard Lampoon*, sketches for *The Second City* or *SNL*, or a movie. However, several of the comedy-writing rules and techniques do apply. A detailed description of those rules is beyond the scope, breath, and girth of this article. The ones most appropriate for inserts into serious text will be presented with examples in a subsequent section. They relate to the following: (1) irony, (2) hyperbole, (3) wordplay, (4) reference and call back, (5) parody, (6) rule of three, (7) K rule, and (8) figures of speech (Dijkers, 2014).

Humor Infrastructure

Most any form of humor must have *incongruity* (derived from two Latin root words: “*in*,” meaning “to produce,” and “*congruitus*,” meaning “convulsive laughter”). The incongruity occurs between two contrasting elements: the *expected*, which is serious, followed by the *unexpected*, which is an illogical surprise. The latter may be exaggerated, unreasonable, inappropriate, or just plain weird. That unexpected twist is the *punch line*. It is the juxtaposition of the expected with the unexpected (Berk, 2003). Pump irony. The contrast between “serious” and “punch line” creates the laughter (aka General Theory of Verbal Humor) (Attardo, & Raskin, 1991).

The incongruity must be based on a *commonly understood situation*. The premise for all humor is that your readers understand the serious content leading to the humor. Seriousness is our specialty. If the readers do not understand the premise, they will not get the punch.

EXAMPLE (Serious premise about obstacles in an academic career):

If you have not faced any obstacles, just wait.

The two elements follow that premise:

1. *Serious set-up*. As the humor unfolds in a phrase, sentence, or anecdote, tension builds toward the unexpected punch line. An audience feels this tension from jokes delivered orally; in written humor, the reader has no clue what is coming next, much less a punch line.

EXAMPLE (Serious sentence about warning):

There will be *Jaws*-like thumping, ominous music to warn you that something seismic is about to happen. Beware!

2. *Unexpected twist or punch line*. The final twist or quick flip from sense to nonsense triggers the chuckle or laughter that releases the tension. The sharper the contrast and the more suddenly it strikes, the more successful the humor. The element of surprise is crucial. “Surprise” means your readers’ eyeballs will pop out of their sockets and dangle down to their kneecaps from the optic nerves.

Some serious academic readers will not detect that a punch is coming and may not recognize the actual punch when they read it. Their mindset is “serious,” which is locked in like a drone’s GPS. They may read over the joke with no response unless someone punches them in the face or pokes them in the eyeball with a fork. Then there will be a response.

EXAMPLE (Humorous sentence wordplay on the line from Jaws):

When it happens, “You’re going to need a bigger paragraph.”

An additional punch or more may be added:

3. *Tag*. A second, third, and more punch lines can be tagged on to the end of the joke:

EXAMPLE (Another punch):

You probably know colleagues who have experienced thumping.

COMPLETE HUMOR EXAMPLE:

If you have not faced any obstacles, just wait. There will be *Jaws*-like thumping, ominous music to warn you that something seismic is about to happen. Beware! When it happens, “You’re going to need a bigger paragraph.” You probably know colleagues who have experienced thumping.

Humor Subtext

Well-written humor has a secret message, but not all humor contains this message. Beyond

the literal words, the writer is subconsciously communicating a value judgment, opinion, observation, or twisted thought that readers receive when they “get the joke.” This hidden message is the secret sauce in the humor that is revealed only in the readers’ minds. For example, that message may be embedded in a parody which mocks current practices, problems, or issues or self-deprecation about one’s writing of the article.

The question is: “Can we get to the examples? I’m getting bored!” I hear you, but that is not the question. It is: “What is the humor really saying?” As academicians, there is plenty of wiggle room in articulating our message. The target of the subtext should be clear. In the previous joke about the obstacles we face in academia, the subtext provides a warning about the adversity that we will encounter in our careers.

Placement of Humor

As you generate humor for your manuscript, where do you insert it? Just about everywhere! However, it is not random. Every insertion of humor should have a purpose. Overall, the humor serves the same function as the loud, bumpy *rumble strips* (aka *drunk bumps* or *growlers*) in the center and side of highways. Those strips are designed to alert drowsy drivers before they drive off the road into a water buffalo. The humor is intended to startle your readers as they start drifting off from the serious content. Where will your readers drift? You want your readers engaged throughout your article.

Once you have completed a draft of your serious manuscript, go back to the beginning and work your way through the text step by step. Roleplay your readers. Nod off when you think they will nod off, but do not forget to wake up. Where will they need a humor break to snap them to attention?

Start with the title. There are suggestions for writing serious titles (*AM Journal Staff, 2018a, 2018b*), but also others for infusing humor (*Sagi & Yechiam, 2008*). (*NOTE: Specific practical guidelines for this process will be presented at the end of this article.*)

Readership Characteristics

If you use humor to connect with your students and professional audiences to make your

content more memorable when you are speaking to them, why not do the same in your writing? Your teaching strategies are driven by your students’ characteristics, and your professional speaking is custom-tailored to your academic, corporate, or medical/healthcare audience. Humor can jolt your face-to-face audiences to attention and bolster the impact of your message.

Similarly, the humor in your writing can jolt your readers. However, before you do any jolting or bolstering, you need to research your readership. The readers of a specific journal may differ markedly from those of another journal or a textbook or monograph. Identify your reader base.

Who are the recipients of your writing? Define the demographic composition of your readership. The international distribution is particularly of interest. Readerships are becoming increasingly diverse. The journal editor or book publisher should be able to provide you with that profile. Many journals are produced by professional associations with membership directories.

You should consider the characteristics of your readers in your writing. You are providing them with important information on a topic in which they are interested and doing so seriously with a few doses of humor. Humor in journal and book writing can be used to connect with a reader audience of students, faculty, researchers, clinicians, and administrators. Know your readership.

Types of Humor

How do you decide what content to use in your humor? It is like figuring out what to say to impress your first eHarmony® date between the appetizer and water buffalo entrée at Olive Garden® Italian Restaurant. Humor in serious articles is not like a stand-up joke. It is in print forever in a professional journal. You need to be especially careful about what you write. Let’s examine the types of inappropriate humor and the pool of appropriate humor available to all of us.

Inappropriate Humor

There are several targets and formats where humor is inappropriate: (1) offensive humor, (2) culture-specific language, (3) sensitive topics and contentious issues, and (4) classical research articles. You really do not want to offend.

Offensive humor. Among the humor flotsam and jetsam floating through the congested humorsphere of the media and Internet, begin by considering the types of humor to avoid which could be offensive to any reader. Our hero previously identified and described six categories of offensive humor: (1) put-downs, (2) sarcasm, (3) ridicule, (4) profanity, (5) vulgarity, and (6) sexual content and innuendo (Berk, 2009a, 2009c, 2014). They are inappropriate in academic writing and apply to all forms of verbal humor and humorous images and graphics. You may know colleagues who possess a black belt in sarcasm. Offensive humor can also cause migrating geese to change course.

Whether you agree or disagree with my categories, you need to draw your own line and *set the standard for the types of humor you use and your publisher will accept*. Believe it or not, there are college textbooks that contain several categories of offensive humor. The authors of those books probably would not notice if a FedEx® truck parked on their heads. Those offensive violations should not be encouraged.

Culture-specific language. Avoid *slang, street language, aphorisms, clichés, idioms, memes, diphthongs, carbuncles, and invective refractions* in your humor that may be confusing, misinterpreted, or possibly offensive. Those types of language have become so pervasive in our culture that sometimes it is hard to discern the real meaning of the message.

Sensitive topics and contentious issues. Before you start ladling out humor, you need to consider specific topics for which humor may be inappropriate. Humor is not a good fit with sensitive, contentious, and hot-button issues involving (a) personal characteristics and beliefs related to gender, race, ethnicity, age (generation), class, religion, sexual orientation (LGBTQ), and mental and physical disabilities, (b) celebrities, (c) politics, especially targeting the U.S. branches of government (Legislative, Judicial, and Criminal), and (d) barnyard animals. In-house or in-profession humor that airs dirty laundry should also be avoided. It is rarely complimentary and would not be understood by out-profession readers.

Sometimes the topic of the article may not lend itself to levity. In a recent trilogy of articles in this journal on microaggressions in the workplace and classroom, I could not find any appropriate humor

to lighten up the subject matter. If your intuition or gut says don't do it, don't. If you do it, you may need a new gut. Do not force the humor. It should be natural and not gratuitous.

Classical research articles. The classical research, experimental design format for quantitative and qualitative studies may not be the best vehicle for jocularity. That format is usually outlined in "author guidelines for submission" for most journals. Our conditioning on what to write in each of the design sections is so deeply implanted in our brain from our academic training that even the thought of injecting humor can produce a cerebral hemorrhage.

Appropriate Humor

After the list of inappropriate humor, what's left? What topics are safe, nonoffensive domains for humor material in a scientific article? There are four domains of positive, appropriate humor content and formats you might consider: (1) professional humor topics, (2) culture-specific humor, (3) culture-free or generic humor, and (4) non-classical research articles. Think about these topics in what you write and who will read it. Heavy mental lifting may be required.

Professional humor topics. Pick targets with which you and your readership can relate, such as technology, social media, departmental policies and procedures, rules and regulations, teaching issues, research practices, IRB reviews, and clinical practices. Focus on what you experience together. Parodies or jokes on these topics should focus on the problems or issues, not the people involved.

Culture-specific humor. This domain draws on material from the media and performing arts: (1) TV programs, (2) commercials and infomercials, (3) movies, (4) music videos, and (5) musicals and plays. Even though a segment of our culture seems to have congealed into a state of outrage, vulgarity, and intolerance, we need to focus on the positive characteristics.

Your *Cultural Intelligence (CQ)* plays a significant role in your knowledge of and sensitivity to your own culture as well as others (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Livermore, 2015). The products and services advertised everywhere in the country of origin and familiar brand names of everything fit into this category. Most of the humor material we see everywhere is culture-specific.

One major limitation of this type of humor is that international readers may be unfamiliar with it. They may not understand and connect with the joke. Even if the readers do understand it, they may react differently to your humor than you expect. As a writer, you need to be sensitive to these characteristics and exercise your perspective as you craft your humor.

Your familiarity with the similarities and differences of your readers' cultures can markedly affect the success of your humor. Your awareness and ability to adapt your humor to those cultures is critical. If your journal has a diverse international readership, you may tailor your humor to specific cultures or choose to use culture-specific humor sparingly. For example, pick TV programs and movies that are bigger than life with which many professionals worldwide will be familiar.

Culture-free or generic humor. In contrast to the previous domain, culture-free humor is based on universal, common core, generic topics that are not specific to any culture, country, or planet. They could involve animals, airlines, technology, food, diseases, drugs, and weather. The humor should focus on the fundamental characteristics and ingredients with which everyone can connect.

With the increasing diversity of readership of professionals in most fields, language and cultural differences are a significant concern in choosing humor content. *The success of your humor hinges on how carefully you select the right stuff and write material that is universally understood.*

Non-classical research articles. If traditional empirical research articles are not the best vehicle for humor, then what types of publications are appropriate? Just about every other type can be used: literature reviews and integration research, theoretical papers, innovative techniques, applied research, commentary, critiques, notes and rejoinders, Amazon book and toothbrush reviews, parking tickets, grocery lists, and tax returns.

It is not that these publications are less serious, although some are an absolute hoot; it is that they are not locked into a research design reporting format. A comment such as "The sample size ranged from five to slightly smaller than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir" is not as appropriate for the "Sampling Design" section of an empirical

study as it would be in one of the other formats that permit more flexibility.

Top 10 Humor Techniques

What follows is a smorgasbord of 10 generic ideas and techniques you can use in your writing. These techniques and examples use a serious set-up that ranges from a phrase to several sentences, followed by one or more punches. All of the examples have appeared in my publications on a variety of serious topics over the past 20 years. More are available in my articles, chapters, and books (see www.ronberk.com and <http://www.linkedin.com/in/ronberk/>). Parody is one of the most common forms I use. Pick the ones you like, put your own spin on them to make them funnier, and apply them to your content.

1. Warnings and Cautions

One of the simplest techniques is to create parodies of real warnings for products, food, and prescriptions. A lengthy list of the possibilities has already been collected (Berk, 2003). We are used to receiving warnings in print and nonprint media all the time. Your "warning" can appear at the beginning of an article or chapter or anywhere throughout the text. The word **WARNING** is the serious set-up for the punch that follows. There may also be a lead-in sentence set-up. Some examples are given below:

- **WARNING:** If you have the attention span of goat cheese, this text will be interrupted regularly by warnings such as this one to check if you're still awake. Are you? Heeere we go.
- **WARNING:** In order to satisfy FDA regulations for all articles produced in nature, you are forewarned that different sections of this article can contain tree nuts, soy, hormones, antibiotics, dairy, gluten, pesticides, preservatives, extra lard and sodium, high glycemic, MSG, GMO, MIC, KEY, and MOUSE. All ingredients are unnatural and processed in a laboratory under duress and pretenses. The document should be read online to minimize contamination and allergic reactions. Enjoy!
- **CAUTION:** Reading the following paragraphs could cause drowsiness, nose bleeds, bloating, hair loss, various mutations, and a substantial penalty for early withdrawal.

- **CAUTION:** Reading this article may cause insomnia, euphoria, lung flukes, tapeworms, and leprosy. Now listen carefully. Put your best ear on this screen. I am only going to say this once. The preceding effects are not real. I made them up for your entertainment. However, if you get earwax on this screen, I'm going to poke you in the eye.

2. Commercial Breaks and Intermissions

Similar to no. 1, two commercials or intermission boxes can be placed at key locations in the text. These can be parodies or take-offs of TV programs or well-known slogans or taglines of insurance companies who use humor or products regularly advertised:

- **LAW & ORDER: Student Ratings of Instruction.** In the higher education system, the learning environment is supported by two separate, yet mega-important, groups: the professors who find value in *SRI*s and those who do not. These are their stories. Ka Chung!
- **SUGGESTION:** I recommend you peruse the prequel to gain a perspective on the policy and legal issues involved with student outcomes. As a dedicated educator, it's what you do. If you want to save 15% or more on car insurance, you switch to GEICO®. It's what you do. We now resume this prologue already in progress.
- **Consultant Recommendation:** If you're not sure how to proceed, talk to Farmers® Insurance. They know a thing or two because they've seen a thing or two. THEY ARE FARMERS®. Bum Bee Dee Bum, Bum Bum Bum. We now resume Recommendation 6 already in progress.

3. Alerts, Notes, and Sidebars

In addition to the preceding techniques, you can incorporate a variety of alerts throughout the running text. They can be linked to the content of paragraphs or draw attention to a particular point you want to emphasize. They can take the form of Digression Alerts, Security Alerts, Spoiler Alerts, Grammatical Notes, and other alerts:

- **READER ALERT:** Imagine you are reading this article seriously (Is there any other way?). Then, all of sudden, CRASH: the Miami SWAT Team barrels through your front door with a humongous battering ram, guns-a-blazing. This

intrusion should be quite a surprise because you live in North Dakota. Anyway, back to the sentence somewhere above.

- **DISTRACTION ALERT:** As I begin this section, to avoid any annoying unimportant interruptions that could break your concentration, please TURN OFF your cell phone, hair dryer, shaver, jackhammer, and cement mixer. Your compliance is appreciated.
- **[NOTE:** Value-Added Models (VAM) are actually a family of statistical models (Braun, 2015). I bet you thought that statistics don't have families with children, grandchildren, mothers-in-law, and pets. They do. They just keep their personal lives private and don't share on Facebook. You can find them on LinkedIn.]
- **Bodily Fluid Alert:** The next few paragraphs contain a lot of bodily fluids. In order to conform with the OSHA Standards, you should probably don latex gloves, gown, and mask now. This is for your own protection. If you are contaminated, don't blame me.

OUTRAGE VENT: Hold this box up to your mouth and express your outrage in the area in parentheses below in a loud and clear voice. Okay? Go.

(Scream Your Outrage HERE)

Okay. That's enough. You drooled on the box. That was unnecessary. You should be ashamed of yourself. Stop already. Calm down. Thank you for your input and saliva DNA sample.

4. Lists

Follow the Rule of 3. Think of any list as a set-up for a punch. When you create a pattern of like items in any list, add 1 or more punches as appropriate. Use at least two elements to begin the serious list; then end with a twist. The context may require more than two, and you may add tags after the punch. Note the serious lead-ins below:

- What is your long-term goal? Full professor? Department chair? Dean? President? Nobel Laureate? Queen of England?
- The conceptualization of humor adopted by psychological theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Gordon Allport, Rollo May, and Dr. Phil...
- Boomers are remembered, mostly by other

Boomers, for rocking the '60s with Vietnam War protests on college campuses, Woodstock, experimenting with hallucinogens, and the Broadway musical *Hair* (based on the TV sitcom *The Brady Bunch*).

- Here's an inventory of prehistoric, no-tech networking resources you may still be using:
 1. stone tablets
 2. faded business cards with a paper clip or rubber band around them
 3. print address book
 4. Rolodex® cards in or out of the tray or base
 5. scrunched napkins with a smeared ink name and phone number (WAIT! That's for dates.)

5. Derivations of English and Foreign Words and Phrases

Key words in running text provide an opportunity to parody word derivations with which everyone is familiar. It stops the reader short for a humor break because they know what the word means. It can be applied to English or foreign words and expressions. Here's the FORMULA: Real word (a Latin, Greek, Spanish, French, etc. meaning, "ridiculous meaning"). See examples below:

- *carpe diem*, a Latin expression meaning literally, "Your carpet looks ugly."
- *detachment* is derived from two Latin root words, "de," meaning, "remove," and "tachmentus," meaning, "this javelin from my skull."
- *raison d'être* (a Greek phrase meaning literally, "there's a raisin in your nose")
- *gravitas* (DERIVATION: a French word derived from "grav," meaning "order," and "itas," meaning "the zucchini.")
- *Flashpoint* is derived from two Latin words, *flashus*, meaning "your shorts," and *pointum*, meaning, "are on fire."

6. Cultural References (TV & Movies)

Pick bigger-than-life cultural references with which most of your readership would be familiar. These references provide a connection with your readers. The problem is that some international fans of your writing may not know some of the references that enable them to appreciate the humor. Use them sparingly.

- Well-known psychiatrists like Drs. Leo Marvin (*What About Bob?*), Sidney Freedman (*M*A*S*H*), and Hannibal Lecter (*The Silence of the Lambs*) report that people with severe mental disorders, such as Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, Norman Bates, and guests on *The Jerry Springer Show*, lack a sense of humor.
- Negative feedback occurs with regularity throughout our careers. It can crush you like a bug and derail your success. Moreover, as you have heard many times, "There's no crying in academe!"
- Those faculty members who cannot cope with adversity will eventually disappear like the teenagers in a *Friday the 13th* movie.

7. Colorful Figurative Language

Use unexpected irony, similes, and metaphors that burst with color to grab attention. The comparison of a serious idea with an extreme, ridiculous one furnishes an effective vehicle for humor:

- Where to begin? It is like eating one of those dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park*. Once you forklift your filet of T-Rex off your grill, which is the size of Wyoming, where do you take your first bite? It is a tough decision.
- We have all seen faculty members with the IQ of a starfish and the charisma of a battering ram who represent the antithesis of greatness also succeed.
- Negative peer reviews and other sources of adversity may generate the same level of popularity as head lice.
- They are like all the bad food we eat, except kale, which tastes like insulation unless you blend it into a smoothie with fruit, yogurt, flax seed, and Doritos® to mask the flavor.

8. Hyperbole in Descriptions

Exaggerate until the words explode off the page:

- Professional feedback can produce fist pumping and football end-zone-type celebratory dances.
- Celebrate that accomplishment with appropriate pomp and circumstance or, at a minimum, an upturned barrel of Gatorade®.
- They have sustained verbal blunt-force trauma over and over again, but remain on top of the heap as the dominant approach to evaluate teaching.

- Tackling this endeavor may seem like a Sisyphean feat (*GREEK FLASHBACK*: Sisyphus is remembered for pushing a Buick Regal up a mountain, only to have it roll back and smooch him into a pancake). Like the Buick, you will probably receive pushback from some faculty, but keep in mind that you are not alone in this process.
- CAT scans reveal that most reviewers exhibit significant brain activity and blood flow, yet some may misunderstand, misinterpret, or misjudge your work.
- Do you need this training manual? If not, then STOP READING NOW! Close the manual. I still see you. This manual is not for you. Sell it on eBay or use it to kill bugs or small rodents.

9. Take-offs on Well-Known Quotes

Parody classic quotes your reader would not expect in your article. Famous quotes from Shakespeare are universal as are quotes from blockbuster movies:

- **BOTTOM LINES:** As Cassius once said before eating a Caesar salad, “The fault, dear educators, is not in our VAM (Value-Added Models), but in ourselves, that we are not able to input the right data” (Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 140–141).
- The academic environment requires grit to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous attacks on our work and person and to climb out of the pedagogical potholes into which we may fall. However, grit is not a panacea to deflect all of the arrows or some of the slings.

10. Self-Deprecation

Think like your readers as you proceed through the text. Get into their heads. What words would they use? This technique can add emphasis to your points in text:

- Certainly, every academic discipline has its fair share of wing-tipped, corduroy-suited professors who sport pocket protectors and Mr./Ms. Dork designer horn-rimmed glasses that come from the factory with the nose support pre-broken and white tape wrapped around it.
- Humor? Are you kidding me? In a professional journal? Well, yeah. You can chuckle or chortle all the way to the scholarly journals on humor. There are more serious humor researchers than members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. And they take humor seriously, the researchers that is, not the choir. “So what’s this article about? It is certainly not very funny so far.”
- The key question is: “*When is this article going to end? BOOOORING! Get to the point.*” Wait! There’s another question.

Practical Guidelines to Insert Humor in Academic Writing

I bet you are wholly flummoxed by now. What are you supposed to do with your manuscript? Where do you stick the humor? After reviewing the preceding examples, I know you’re thinking: “Is my manuscript containing humor going to end up in the ‘Rejected Manuscript Dumpster in the Sky’?” Here are a few suggested steps:

1. *Write your serious content.* Draft your article, chapter, or book manuscript as you usually would. That content comes first. This draft is the version that will subsequently undergo multiple reviews, revisions, and rejections, until you decide to drive over it with your SUV. This article suggests you should not stop there. Add humor, and then drive over your paper. Here are a few steps to add that humor.
2. *Add humor to the title.* Consider a humorous title to grab the readers’ attention. Start thinking about a title that will convey the thrust of the content in a witty, pithy catch-phrase.
3. *Create a warning, caution, or disclaimer.* As you think about the title and subject matter to follow, would a humorous warning or disclaimer under the title be appropriate to set the tone and subtext message for the article? It can serve as a teaser for the text to follow.
4. *Insert humorous illustrative anecdotes.* Review the text for spots where stories can provide concrete examples or illustrate points. Pinpoint examples that can use a dose of humor to make them memorable. The humor is designed to sustain interest and draw the reader back into the text. Professional or personal stories can dramatize the importance of the material with colorful images that can connect with your readers’ experiences.
5. *Insert humor at key points in running text.* Read your draft text as your readers would. Adopt

their perspectives, not yours. Get into their heads and try to think like them. When and where do they need a break in the text to reel them back in if they are drifting? At what points will they conk out? Where are the proper places to insert humor? What paragraphs need a punch?

The humor can punctuate important points in the text. Engage your readers with words, phrases, especially figures of speech and popular catch-phrases that create strong images in their minds. Those words can increase attention, memory, and retention of concepts and ideas. Use your humor to play with your readers' minds. You are trying to have fun with a serious topic. Draw from the numerous techniques listed previously as a starting point or generate your own.

6. *Edit the manuscript for serious content and funniness.* From your readers' perspectives, is the serious content clear and understandable? How do think the humor works? Does it fit? Does it do its job or is it too distracting? Does it seem gratuitous? When in doubt, cut it.
7. *Send the manuscript out for informal review.* You have done all you can to create a publishable manuscript. Now it is time to get feedback from others. Pick colleagues who can critique the serious text as well as the humor. How do they react? How will the humor be received by the journal reviewers and editor?
8. *Revise the manuscript to incorporate feedback.* Prepare your final masterpiece for submission to an appropriate journal.

Coda on Academic Writing

Traveling through this article has not been exactly a National Geographic adventure. I definitely need images. However, it is almost over so you can wash the buffalo hairs off your SUV's bumper.

I recommend that you write your serious journal article, chapter, or book and then make a decision about the humor. The integrity of your manuscript remains intact. There is no ersatz substitute for this version. Every humor technique and trick illustrated throughout this article is optional. They are add-ons, tethered to the text. Test your new-found humor skills with a couple of jokes. Wait for the reviews to come in. Those add-

ons will not diminish the impact and importance of your publication. They may even become memes that spread to other academic writers.

Do not lose sight of your primary target: the water buffalo. I jest. Of course, it is your *readers*. The content and form of your final article or book should meet their needs. Otherwise, why are you writing it? Now that you have gotten to the last sentence, you are on the verge of becoming a rogue humor writer. If you find any of the preceding examples useful and decide to take the humor leap over the standard scientific language, I would be shocked!

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