# The ‘ham it up’ how to

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Is it possible to teach instructors to be funny? Biostatistics professor and humor researcher Ron Berk, PhD, thinks so.

Berk doesn’t expect to morph John McLaughlin of “The McLaughlin Group” into Chris Rock, but, he says, “Making learning fun doesn’t require you to do stand-up comedy. Anybody can do it.”

In a 2005 article in *Teaching Excellence* (Vol. 17, No. 2), Berk shares several tips for injecting humor into your teaching:

• **Make your syllabus funny.** Insert jocular descriptors like “the greatest class you’ll ever take” under your course title, put funny prerequisites for the course like requiring students to have read “War and Peace” or list outrageous office hours, such as “available from 12 to 12: 01 p.m.” so that students actually read your syllabus.

• **Use real or hypothetical humorous situations.** Tap cartoons, TV clips and other examples to enliven abstract concepts. For instance, psychologist Randy Garner, PhD, uses “American Idol” audition episodes to illustrate self-handicapping and selection bias.

• **Ask punch-line questions during question and answer sessions.** Set up a joke by asking a question. After getting a response ask, “How many of you *think* this is the correct answer?” Then, add the punch, “How many of you don’t care?” or “How many of you don’t like to be awakened during class?”

• **Make questions and examples outrageous, ridiculous or exaggerated.** For instance, Berk asks students to analyze whether “nurses who routinely participate in the sport ‘Knock the Physician Off the Pedestal’ will demonstrate higher levels of joy than nurses who absolutely refuse to engage in such irreverent behavior” by performing the separate variance T-test.

• **Dramatize your material.** Develop skits or demonstrations with music to illustrate theories, concepts and processes. In a parody of “The Odd Couple,” Berk wears a backward baseball cap and ill-fitting clothes while holding a large cigar as he stands alongside an impeccably dressed colleague. He asks his students to list the similarities between the two faculty members. Then, Berk has students compute a Pearson correlation and square it, which is the percentage of variance explained of one variable by the other.