

San José State University
Department of English & Comparative Literature
ENGL 181, Special Topics (American Humor Writing)
Fall 2014

Instructor: Nick Taylor
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Office Hours: Mon/Weds 2:00PM – 3:45PM and by appointment.
Class Days/Time: Mon/Weds 12:00PM-1:15 PM
Classroom: Clark 306

Course Description

This upper-division undergraduate seminar is a survey of American written humor, with an emphasis on essays, sketches, and short stories from Mark Twain to the present. In addition, we will examine several theories of humor, using primary and secondary sources. Students will write six original humor pieces as well as a seminar paper demonstrating their understanding of the theoretical material.

Student Learning Goals

This course addresses the following Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) approved for the BA in English:

SLO 1: Read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, or rhetoric.

SLO 2: Show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American, and World Literature.

SLO 3: Write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and nature of the subject.

SLO 4: Develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively.

SLO 5: Articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

The list of all approved SLOs are listed on the English Department's website:
<http://www.sjsu.edu/english/undergraduate/studentlearninggoals.html>

Course Requirements

Each week's reading and writing assignments are listed in the Schedule below. I may add assignments periodically, so be sure to attend class.

Reading Assignments [SLO 1]

See Schedule for reading assignments. I may also hand out additional reading, so be sure to attend every class meeting. There will be reading quizzes.

Creative Writing Assignments [SLO 3]

Roughly every other week you will turn in an original 1-2pp piece of humor writing. I will read the best (and worst) pieces aloud in the next class meeting. Not all of your pieces will be funny, but some will. Fear not!

Seminar Paper [SLOs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

This course does not have a final exam. Instead, you will write a seminar paper of 10-15pp on a topic of your choice, due on the last day of class. I will meet with each of you midway through the semester to discuss your topic. Possibilities include, but are not limited to:

- an original theory of humor, or a well-reasoned argument in favor of one of the theories we have discussed in class
- close reading and analysis of a single author's style
- an analysis of a particular trope, format, or style, using examples from multiple authors
- an analysis of the way a particular culture (racial, ethnic, religious, etc.) is reflected in humor writing

Grading

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

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|--|-----|
| • Seminar Paper | 30% |
| • Creative Writing Assignments (6 total) | 30% |
| • Reading Quizzes | 20% |
| • Class Participation | 20% |

Late Assignment Policy

I realize that it's difficult to come up with something funny every week, and I understand that sometimes life gets in the way of completing your work on time. **You are allowed to turn in up to two of your creative writing pieces a week late.** Note that this means you have to turn in two pieces the next week. I will not accept any creative writing pieces that are more than a week late.

Reading quizzes cannot be made up, and the final paper must be submitted on time.

Required Texts

- *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*, Twain, Howells, and Clark, eds. (1888)
- *Disquiet, Please! More Humor Writing from The New Yorker*, Remnick and Finder, eds. (2010) [Abbreviated **NY** in Schedule and Assignments, below]
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey (2011)
- *The Best of McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, Chris Monks, ed. (2014) [Abbreviated **McS** in Schedule and Assignments, below]
- *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* by Henri Bergson. (1900)
- Photocopied course reader, available in class [Abbreviated **CR** in Schedule and Assignments, below]

Schedule and Assignments

Class meetings will be held Mondays and Wednesdays 12:00pm-1:15pm from August 25 through December 10 with the exception of September 1 (Labor Day).

Mon, Aug 25

Intros

Wed, Aug 27

Topic

Memoir

Reading Due

NY: "In the Waiting Room" by David Sedaris (509)

NY: "One" by Peter De Vries (476)

McS: "The Magic 8 Ball Amended by My Mother for My Middle-School Years" by Kate Hahn (161)

McS: "A Personal Essay by a Personal Essay" by Christy Vannoy (187)

Mon, Sept 1

NO CLASS (Labor Day)

Wed, Sept 3

Topic

Memoir

Reading Due

Twain: "Our Italian Guide" by Mark Twain (380)

NY: "The Tired Chronicles" by Betsy Berne (437)

NY: "Disquiet, Please, We're Turning!" by S.J. Perelman (482)

Mon, Sept 8

Topic

Memoir

Reading Due

CR: "Philosophy of Humor" parts 1 and 2 ("Humor's Bad Reputation" and "The Superiority Theory")

Fey: *Bossypants*, pp 1-80

Writing Due

Humor Piece #1: Memoir

Wed, Sept 10

Topic

Memoir

Reading Due

CR: "Philosophy of Humor" part 3 ("The Relief Theory")

Fey: *Bossypants*, pp 81-162

Mon, Sept 15

Topic

Memoir

Reading Due

CR: "Philosophy of Humor" part 4 ("The Incongruity Theory")

Fey: *Bossypants*, pp 163-210

Wed, Sept 17

Topic

Memoir

Reading Due

CR: "Philosophy of Humor" part 5 ("Humor as Play, Laughter as Play Signal")

Fey: *Bossypants*, pp 211-275

Mon, Sept 22

Topic

Monologue

Reading Due

McS: "What I Would Be Thinking About If I Were Billy Joel Driving Toward a Holiday Party Where I Knew There Was Going to Be a Piano" by Michael Ian Black (43)

McS: "Hello Stranger on the Street, Could You Please Tell Me How to Take Care of My Baby?" by Wendy Molyneux (51)

McS: "I'm Comic Sans, Asshole" by Mike Lacher (83)

NY: "Awake" by Jenny Allen (235)

Wed, Sept 24

Topic

Monologue

Reading Due

CR: "A Quest to Understand What Makes Things Funny" by Shane Snow

NY: "Four Short Crushes" by Paul Simms (54)

NY: "Lowering My Standards" by Jack Handey (224)

NY: "The Diary of a Lady" by Dorothy Parker (291)

NY: "What I'd Say to the Martians" by Jack Handey (316)

Mon, Sept 29

Topic

Monologue

Reading Due

NY: "This Is No Game" by Jack Handey (318)

NY: "I'm Afraid I Have Some Bad News" by Larry Doyle (397)

NY: "The Underminer" by Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan (454)

Twain: "The Neat Person" by Josh Billings (469)

Writing Due

Humor Piece #2: Monologue

Wed, Oct 1

Topic

Fiction

Reading Due

CR: "I Can Speak!™" by George Saunders

Twain: "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" by Mark Twain (3)

Mon, Oct 6

Topic

Fiction

Reading Due

Twain: "The Belle of Vallejo" by W. L. Alden (254)

Twain: "Tushman's Toothpuller" by John Phoenix (29)

Twain: "Rip Van Winkle" by Washington Irving (129)

Wed, Oct 8

Topic

Found Style

Reading Due

CR: "Dissecting a Frog: How to Write a Humor Piece" by Teddy Wayne

McS: "Whoops" by Mike Sacks (19)

McS: "A Letter to Optimus Prime from His Geico Auto Insurance Agent" by John Frank Weaver (67)

McS: "A Day in the Life of the Target-Market Female" by Katie Brinkworth (109)

McS: "Middle Manager's Oath" by Christopher Mah (131)

McS: "After a Thorough Battery of Tests We Can Now Recommend 'The Newspaper' as the Best E-Reader on the Market" by John Flowers (177)

Mon, Oct 13

Topic

Found Style

Reading Due

NY: "The Zagat History of My Last Relationship" by Noah Baumbach (11)

NY: "Audio Tour" by Patricia Marx (16)

NY: "Share Our Joy" by Larry Doyle (18)

NY: "The Lonely Planet Guide to My Apartment" by Jonathan Stern (273)

Wed, Oct 15

Topic

Found Style

Reading Due

NY: "Ask the Optimist!" by George Saunders (276)

NY: "My Living Will" by Paul Rudnick (314)

NY: "Side Effects" by Steve Martin (375)

Writing Due

Humor Piece #2: Found Style

Mon, Oct 20

Topic

Parody

Reading Due

NY: "The Whore of Mensa" by Woody Allen (37)

McS: "In Which I Fix My Girlfriend's Grandparents' Wi-Fi and Am Hailed as a Conquering Hero" by Mike Lacher (35)

Wed, Oct 22

Topic

Parody

Reading Due

NY: "A Visit from Saint Nicholas (in the Ernest Hemingway Manner)" by James Thurber (241)

NY: "The Gospel of Debbie" by Paul Rudnick (419)

Writing Due

Humor Piece #4: Parody or Found Style

Mon, Oct 27

Topic

Instructions

Reading Due

CR: "Liberated Humor: Sexual Humor in All-Female Groups" by Janet Bing

McS: "The Ultimate Guide to Writing Better Than You Do" by Colin Nissan (191)
NY: "8 Simple Rules for Dating My Ex-Wife" by David Owen (14)

Wed, Oct 29

Topic

Instructions

Reading Due

NY: "Theory and Practice of Editing *New Yorker* Articles" by Wolcott Gibbs (145)
NY: "Superstring Theory for Dummies" by Zev Borow (377)

Mon, Nov 3

Topic

Politics

Reading Due

McS: "Why There Aren't Many Right-Wing Observational Comedians" by Teddy Wayne (137)
McS: "America: A Review" by Megan Amram (171)
Twain: "Cannibalism in the Cars" by Mark Twain (519)

Wed, Nov 5

Topic

Politics

Reading Due

NY: "End of the Trail" by Garrison Keillor (300)
NY: "Jeeves and W." by Christopher Buckley (354)

Writing Due

Humor Piece #5: Instructions or Politics

Mon, Nov 10

Topic

Children

Reading Due

McS: "The Four-Year-Old's Workday" (163)
NY: "Shiftless Little Loafers" by Susan Orlean (63)
NY: "The Wisdom of Children" by Simon Rich (76)

Wed, Nov 12

Topic

Children

Reading Due

NY: "Hey, Look" by Simon Rich (79)

NY: "1992 House" by Billy Frolick (421)

Mon, Nov 17

Topic

Animals

Reading Due

Twain: "Blue Jays" by Mark Twain (342)

Twain: "The Cayote" by Mark Twain (433)

Wed, Nov 19

Topic

Animals

Reading Due

Twain: "The Tar Baby" by Uncle Remus (113)

McS: "FAQ: The 'Snake Fight' Portion of Your Thesis Defense" by Luke Burns (85)

Mon, Nov 24

Topic

Animals

Reading Due

NY: "All I Really Needed to Know I Learned by Having My Arms Ripped Off by a Polar Bear" by Andrew Barlow (89)

NY: "Animals All Around Us" by Jack Handey (91)

NY: "Animal Tales" by Simon Rich (112)

Writing Due

Humor Piece #6: Children or Animals

Wed, Nov 26

NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Holiday)

Mon, Dec 1

Topic

Bergson's Theory of Laughter

Reading Due

Bergson: "Laughter," Chapter I (pp 1-32)

Wed, Dec 3

Topic

Bergson's Theory of Laughter

Reading Due

Bergson: "Laughter," Chapter II (pp 33-64)

Mon, Dec 8

Topic

Bergson's Theory of Laughter

Reading Due

Bergson: "Laughter," Chapter III (pp 65-98)

Wed, Dec 10

Writing Due

Final Papers Due

Academic Honesty

Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San José State University, and the University's Academic Integrity Policy requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the Office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The Policy on academic integrity can be found at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of somebody else's words or ideas and is considered an instance of academic dishonesty that instructors must report. You commit plagiarism by:

- buying, stealing, or borrowing a paper (or story);
- hiring someone to write a paper (or story);
- building on someone's ideas without providing a citation;
- or copying from another source or using a source too closely when paraphrasing.

In other words, submit only your own work.

LARC (Learning Assistance Resource Center)

The Learning Assistance Resource Center is an on-campus facility that provides peer tutoring for San José State University students. LARC offers assistance with writing, and if you feel as if you need intensive help beyond what I can offer during office hours, please request a writing tutor. The Center is located in The Student Services Center in the 10th Street Parking Garage, Room 600. The phone number is (408) 924-2587.

Disabilities Policy

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as

soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 requires that students with disabilities register with the DRC to establish a record of their disability.