

# Memo

**To:** The Writer's Craft Student Body

**From:** E. Geist

**CC:**

**Date:** February 28, 2012

**Re:** A Touch of Humour

Humorous writing is hard to teach. Humour is mostly about attitude and style, with a healthy dose of audience awareness. Yeah, fart jokes always work (even on paper where the smell is not so potent; where the trumpeting sound is quite muffled, although, rumour has it, the Japanese are working on ways to have fragrant smells emanate from computer screens – for the sake of selling perfumes and colognes online – so the fart joke has new 21st century outlets. Imagine the endless possibilities), but the audience is crucial. When you write, and attempt to be funny (in most cases humour is unintended and comes naturally. The writer is often unaware that a reader is giggling conspicuously on some crowded bus, while the surrounding passengers pretend to ignore their madness), you are often doing so unintentionally (brackets also help the author to add humour and be 'funny' without taking away from the 'real' or 'serious' text). Back to the audience. Know. The. Audience. The reader - unlike film audiences where laughter is infectious because the audience shares a common text - is an audience of one and the reader's entire personality comes into play to judge the words of a writer funny or not. But don't worry, if one person doesn't laugh, so be it. They're not really that important anyway, unless it is me and you better make me laugh or else. If one-hundred people don't laugh, check your grammar (make it worse. We all know how funny George Dubya is with his magically vexing way of bastardizing the English language and making stupidity a God-given goal). But of (*sic*, ironic, huh, coming from an English teacher's memo) one-thousand people don't laugh, give up on humour and write menus for a living.

In all seriousness, because that is the goal of all educational institutions and laughter frowned upon, when using humour following some tips on audience awareness will be highly beneficial. So here is some advice to help you become funnier.

1. Humour is Cultural: a big bad North American reference may not be understood by an audience in Europe or Africa.
2. Humour is Contextual/Situational : if you are writing an eulogy, humour might not always be the best outlet.
3. Humour is Gender-Dependent: boys and girls, men and women often laugh at different things. Humour about 'male stereotypes' will often get a rile out of 'females' and vice versa.

4. Humour is Age-Restricted : a current events, satirical rant on poverty is not going to titillate an audience of five year olds.
5. Humour is Education-Restricted : obscure references to the ancient Greek comedies might not be understood or appreciated by the masses.
6. Humour is Politically-Sensitive : political allegiances will often slant ones appreciation of a humorous critique. If you are an ardent Stephen Harper fan, then a biting critique of his weasel-like appearance being suited to his surreptitious political behaviour, might leave you angry, not laughing (see Andy Donato 'controversial' cartoon for clarification) .
7. Humour is Sensitive : you might **fiddlestick-en** (contextual?situational?) offend some one.  
Humour is not meant to make everybody comfortable, but know who you are writing to. Is Dave Chappelle's stinging observations on race and politics appreciated, understood and welcomed by everyone? Hell no.

When you write humour, you are not really going to make the reader succumb to some dormant heart condition with a round of gut-wrenching laughter. Humour in writing is often subtle and witty, targeting our cerebral sensibilities rather than our crude desires. Here are some pointers to consider when choosing how to be funny:

1. The Expected : often based on stereotypes
2. The Unexpected : ironic or satiric in nature. Challenge our status quo and make us think beyond our box. Usually longer in scope (short story, novel, film).
3. The Sarcastic : witty, pithy observations or strings of dialogue. Usually short, within short stories, novels, or films.
4. The Weird : anything weird has the potential to be humorous. Weird is also unexpected.
5. The Crude : not really intellectual. Humour using swear words and bodily functions get cheap laughs.

By the way, I wasn't really trying to be funny, and if this memo wasn't funny, don't tell me. It will hurt my feelings.