

## Unit 1: How does humor work?

Writing About Humor aims to teach you how to read and write as a thoughtfully engaged citizen who considers not just the aesthetics of a hilariously written or articulated joke or story—but also their social impact.

In her article “Questions for a Theory of Humor,” Lauren Olin overviews three of the many ways that philosophers, scientists, and cultural critics have tried to explain humor (superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory). Yet she cautions none seems to encompass every comic act. And while we’ll read other theories (like benign violation theory and what I’ll call social corrective theory), part of our work in this unit will be to ask this question with genuine scholarly curiosity: *What makes something funny?*

We start with a question because, as Aaron Ritzenberg and Sue Mendelsohn (the authors of our handbook *How Scholars Write*) note, all good writing projects begin in the pursuit of ignorance. We read research to discover new things and to help us understand what is currently known and what is not known so that we can map the intellectual terrain. Inevitably, in humor and in general, we’ll find that there are some intellectual tensions or dissonances in what we read. As our job, as scholars is to “make sense of the tensions and dissonances” (Ritzenberg & Mendelsohn 6). In this unit, we’ll use writing to first help us sort out our thoughts on humor theory for ourselves, and then to formulate arguments about how stand-up comedians use humor for readers.

In this unit, you can expect to:

- Develop a practice of reading that involves exploring, embracing complexity, and framing challenging questions in writing.
- Practice engaging in writing as an iterative thinking process (rather than a one-time performance).
- Explore the terms ‘scholarly problem’ and ‘scholarly’ conversation and begin to negotiate your relationship as a writer to these important concepts.
- Draft a paper that applies humor theory to one funny clip of your choice.
- Learn to read peers’ drafts and deliver “descriptive feedback” that relays your readerly reactions and questions.
- Learn to accept “descriptive feedback,” to sort through it, and to make deep and meaningful changes to your writing that further your goals and make your prose more legible to your reading audiences.
- Laugh (I hope!).

Each unit of this class is comprised of three things: readings to complete at home; short writing exercises; and a culminating larger writing assignment that involves extensive drafting, peer review, and revision.

## Important Dates/Due Dates

*All assignments are required and due before class on Moodle*

- 2/15 + 2/17: Pre-Writing Tasks Due
- 2/24: Full Draft of Paper 1 Due for Peer Review
- 3/1: Revised Draft of Paper 1 Due for Professor Review
- 3/10: Extensive, Deep Revision of Paper 1 Due

# UNIT 1 SCHEDULE

Date		Topic	Readings <i>to be discussed in class that day</i>	Writing <i>due before class</i>
Tuesday	2/8	Introductions		
Thursday	2/10	What is humor?	<i>How Scholars Write</i> , Chapters 1-2 + "Questions for a Theory of Humor" by Lauren Olin + " <a href="#">What makes something funny</a> " (All Things Considered podcast – 4 minutes)	
Tuesday	2/15	How does humor work?	<i>A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading</i> , Chapters 1+2 + " <a href="#">What makes things humorous</a> " by Caleb Warren and Peter McGraw + " <a href="#">He Looked in the Grim Reaper's Eyes and Nervously Laughed</a> " by Jeffery Klassen	Pre-Writing Task 1
Thursday	2/17	Is humor funny?	<i>A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading</i> , Chapter 3 + " <a href="#">That's Not Funny</a> " by Caitlin Flanagan + Chapter 5 ("Foreigners are Funny") of <i>On Humour</i> by Simon Crichtley	Pre-Writing Task 2
Tuesday	2/22	Writing about humor	<i>How Scholars Write</i> , Chapter 8	
Thursday	2/24	Rethinking humor	<i>How Scholars Write</i> , Chapter 9	Paper 1: Peer Review Draft

Please note: revised copy of Paper 1 is due on Tuesday, March 1 before class.