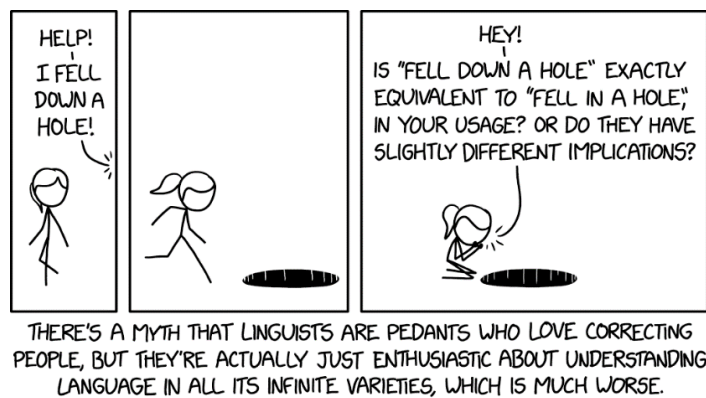


LING 1100: Language, Thought, and Reality:

How We're Laughter Crafters



Comic courtesy of [XKCD](#).

0: KEY INFORMATION

Instructor: John R. Starr | jrs673@cornell.edu

Class meetings: Tuesdays (10:10 AM-11:10 AM) & Thursdays (10:10 AM-11:25 AM) in Morrill Hall 110

Office hours: Monday (12:15-1:15) & Thursday (1:15-2:15) in Morrill Hall B07, and by appointment

1: COURSE DESCRIPTION

Why do “Dad jokes” make us groan, but rom-coms make us smile? How does wordplay integrate with culture to become more than some antics? In this seminar, we will explore how humor, language, and culture interact by approaching a variety of humorous mediums – such as stand-up comedy, satirical essays, cartoons, puns, etc. – with a critical lens. Students will compose personal reflections, reviews of humorous texts, linguistic analyses, and other investigative essays that will contextualize the course material into a larger cultural picture. Particular emphasis will be placed on writing with a target audience in mind.

2: LEARNING GOALS

In this class, we will actively pursue how to:

- develop critical thinking abilities, as applied to multiple interpretative mediums;
- foster a keen attention to language, its use, and its application to itself (aka ‘meta-analysis’);
- write *in relation to* and *for* an audience, either intended or found.

While broad, these goals will manifest differently for each of us. I hope that we can find each of your writing voices, as relevant to these goals and beyond.

3: REQUIRED TEXTS

Throughout the semester, we will engage with a variety of objects: stand-up comedy, humorous poems, satire, comics, and more. Many of these objects will be of your choosing.¹ Additionally, we will examine chapters, passages, and other portions from the following books:

- *The Pun Also Rises* by John Pollack
- *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. & E.B. White
- *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor* edited by Salvatore Attardo

I'm a firm believer in accessible academics. As such, *all required readings will be uploaded to Canvas as PDFs* (and links will be provided to videos, comics, etc. where necessary). However, you are welcome to obtain physical copies of the first two books (*The Pun also Rises*, *The Elements of Style*) if that's more your style. New copies of both books should cost you less than \$25 in total (according to my Amazon checking). No need to buy a copy of the Attardo handbook.

4: COURSE REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

4.1: Course Expectations

Broadly, you are expected to:

1. develop and submit six (6) writing assignments over the course of the semester.
2. attend class and be on-time.
3. complete preparatory work for class, where specified.
4. {participate, contribute} to in-class discussion and group work.
5. meet with me two (2) times over the course of the semester, minimally.

More specifically regarding....

1. the assignments:
 - a. Most assignments will fall into the 3-5 page range; more specific details about each assignment are on Canvas. To reduce the likelihood of last-minute disasters, we will dedicate much class time to preparing for these assignments.
 - b. Policy on late assignments: assignments that are turned in 6 hours after their respective due dates are considered "late". You are permitted one (1) late assignment without penalty. If you have more than one late assignment, there will be a penalty to your grade (see Section 4.2). Please inform me of any exceptional situations that may affect your ability to turn in multiple assignments on time.

¹ One more thing: if you have anything that you find funny or relevant for the class, feel free to share it with me over email! I will do my best to incorporate it into class discussion/materials, where possible.

2. attendance:

- a. Attendance is mandatory. That said, things happen. As such, students are granted three (3) excused absences (for any reason whatsoever). Beyond these three excused absences, grading penalties take effect. If you have any exceptional circumstances that affect your ability to attend class meetings, please contact me *immediately* so we can coordinate.
- b. If you are sick, please do not come to class. Instead, please get some rest 😊
- c. Policy on course material for days that you are absent: it is your responsibility to find out what was covered in class (emailing me, talking to a classmate, etc.). Preparatory work that is due for the missed class should be turned in no later than the end of the day for the next class period that you attend.
- d. Policy on lateness: showing up late to class – defined as arriving past 10:18 – will count as half (1/2) of an excused absence. Therefore: two late arrivals = one excused absence.

3. preparatory work (aka “homework”)

- a. most classes will include some preparatory work: reading a text and responding to it in some way, bringing in some material to share to the class, etc.
- b. To extend the goodwill shown to me by some of my own professors who understood how overwhelming the first year of college can be, I’ve designed the preparatory work to take you less than an hour for each class, with most likely taking around 30-45 minutes. That being said, *it is crucial* that you complete this preparatory work before class, as much of our class time will be dedicated to discussion.
- c. Please keep a journal of your preparatory work for this course, whether it be a physical notebook, a Google Doc, a publicly-available Notion page, or something else. However, please try to keep it all in one place as best you can – if you keep a physical journal, please don’t make me check a bunch of Google Doc links. My brain operates best when uncluttered. A bit more information on the journal:
 - i. Please date all entries for preparatory work so I can easily align what work you did for which days.
 - ii. I will occasionally ask you to turn these journals in so that I can see that you are engaging with the material properly. As such, the preparatory work that you place in this journal should be decipherable and moderately coherent.
 - iii. This journal counts towards your writing pages for this course.
 - iv. Moreover, I encourage you to put any thoughts surrounding this course in this notebook. You can think of it as a “commonplace book” of sorts. While the preparatory work should be decipherable (aka mostly complete sentences, some organization), all other writings/drawings/thinkings in your journal can follow whatever best fits your brain.

4. participation:

- a. I expect you to be an active participant in a majority of our class meetings. I also understand that it can be difficult to speak up (for a variety of reasons) to a larger group. As such, I’ve designed many of our class meetings to have engagement and participation at multiple levels: individual work, pair discussions, group discussions, etc.

5. meetings:

- a. two one-on-one meetings are required by the First Year Writing Program. Each meeting will be around 15-20 minutes long; one will be earlier in early September, the other will be in late October or early November. More information about these conferences will be provided later.
- b. In addition to these required meetings, I'll have office hours (see the first page of this syllabus). Please stop by anytime to discuss the course, writing in general, Cornell, linguistics, non-linguistics, or anything else you might want to chat about. :D

4.2: Grading Contract

As mentioned in Section 3, I believe that academics should be as accessible as possible. To further translate this belief into this course, I will be using a grading contract² for assessment. Grading contracts allow me, as an instructor, to assign you a final grade based on the work that you have completed and the contributions³ you have made to the course. To be explicit: if you've done the work properly, you'll get a good grade. However, I'm not simply looking for completion of assignments and showing up to class – it must be evident that you have engaged with the material and contributed to thinking around it.

There are a number of benefits to a grading contract, but the two most important ones for me are: 1) we can focus on developing individual critical thinking abilities without prioritizing some ways of thinking over others, and 2) it gives you the option to take interesting risks with your writing, rather than taking the safest option to secure a “good grade.” Or, said differently: I want you to become the best writer that you can be, not the best writer version according to some pre-determined ideal.

Here's the specific grading breakdown of the course requirements for passing grades:

	Course Criteria			Logistical Criteria	
	Assignment quality	Preparatory work	Participation & contribution	Max. # of late assignments	Max. # of absences
A	2/3 or 3/3 Course Criteria are Exceptional			1	3
B (default)	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	1	3
C	2/3 Course Criteria are Unsatisfactory			1-3	3-6
D	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	1-3	3-6

Table 1: Breakdown of course requirements for passing grades, according to the grading contract.

² More information about grading contracts – the what's, the how's, the why's – can be found at this wonderful page called [“Grading Contracts 101”](#) (which was constructed by Cornell's very own Kate Navickas, who is fantastic!).

³ “Contributions” here defined loosely as: participation in groupwork, class activities, and discussion; preparation for class; and being present in the course, both mentally and physically.

You will receive a “Satisfactory” mark for category X in the Course Criteria by doing the following:

- completing category X according to the designated criteria;
- engaging with material for category X in an independent and considered manner;
- composing understandable and relevant responses for category X, when necessary (aka: you don’t write gibberish, nor do you stray off topic).

Some key points to extract regarding Table 1:

- You will receive a B if you complete all of the course requirements at a satisfactory level.
- You will receive an A if you complete all of the course requirements at a satisfactory level (minimally), with exceptional work in at least two of the following Course Criteria: *assignment quality, preparatory work, or participation & contribution*.
- You will receive a C if you:
 - complete all of the course requirements to a satisfactory level but have too many late assignments and/or absences. Close cases (aka you have 0 late assignments and 4 absences) can be rounded up to a B, following a successful appeal (sent to me in writing) that justifies the circumstances and reasons surrounding lateness/absences.
 - complete some of the course requirements to a satisfactory level, but are unsatisfactory in two of the following Course Criteria: *assignment quality, preparatory work, participation & contribution*.
- You will receive a D if you:
 - Complete none of the of the course requirements to a satisfactory level.

You will receive an F if you:

- plagiarize or copy from an outside source. Please see the Academic Integrity section below for more information.
- have too many absences (6+) and/or late assignments (3+), barring exceptional circumstances that you’ve alerted me to.

If you are on track to receive a C or lower, I will inform you via email with as much notice as possible. Emails will begin to be sent after I have finished reading over Assignment #2. +/- subdivisions for grades will be assigned in cases where you are close to the upper/lower limit of the requirements.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Our classroom is home to a rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives. I am actively committed to establishing a classroom environment that values and promotes such diversity. As such, I ask all members of our class (myself included) to:

- share their unique experiences, values, and beliefs;
- be open to the views of others and learn from them;
- respect each other's opinions and communicate in a civil manner;
- be considerate to one another as capable and independent thinkers, both inside and outside the classroom.

Note that we will be examining humor, which can sometimes turn volatile. Course materials that I present have been vetted for minimal insensitivity; notifications for potentially-sensitive topics will be provided at the top of the piece, when necessary. If at any time you need to remove yourself from a discussion or an activity due to the material being addressed, I strongly encourage you to do so and support you in your decision; please schedule a meeting with me after so I can adjust course material as needed.

We will never look at *hateful* or *harmful* humor. However, a key part of humor is its ability to tap into the taboo, as analyses of the taboo often reveal interesting truths. To investigate what humor tells us about ourselves and our society, we will consider humor from within the community (or communities) that the creator belongs to. What insights do swear words provide about our linguistic psyche? How do people from {minoritized, oppressed} communities joke about being within that community? How do people with mental health conditions develop material surrounding mental health conditions? And so on.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Each student in this course is expected to abide by the Cornell University [Code of Academic Integrity](#). Any work submitted in this course for academic credit will be the student's own work. Note, however, that you are encouraged to discuss assignments, course material, and approaches to writing with other students.

Should copying occur, both the student who copied work from another student and the student who gave material to be copied will both automatically be dropped to an F. Penalty for violation of this Code can also be extended to include failure of the course and University disciplinary action.

ACCOMODATIONS

In compliance with the Cornell University policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required. Requests for academic accommodations should be made during the first three weeks of the semester so arrangements can be made; exceptional circumstances that require accommodations will be discussed and implemented as needed.

Furthermore, please speak to me if you need accommodations for a religious holiday.

GENERAL RESOURCES

Given this course being one of your first classes here at Cornell, I thought it'd be helpful to provide some of the various resources that are available to you as students.

- [Overview page of Cornell Academic Support and Well-Being](#)
- [Cornell Health Mental Health Resources page](#)
- [Cornell Health Managing Stress page](#)
- [Cornell Health Concern for Others page](#)
- [Knight Institute Resources for Writers](#)
- Things to do in Ithaca...:
 - [when your family visits.](#)
 - [when you're feeling festive.](#)
 - [when you miss your pets.](#)
 - [when you need a cup of joe.](#)

On the remaining pages, I outline the schedule that we'll follow this semester. I reserve the right to modify this syllabus at any time. Any changes in the schedule will be announced in-class, on Canvas, and written in writing below.

SCHEDULE

WEEK	DATE	DUE FOR CLASS	TOPIC(S)
Week 1	August 22 nd	-----	Introductions. Also, identity pie activity.
	August 24 th	Bring a joke or two to class ⁴ .	What is close reading?
Week 2	August 29 th	Read E.B. White quote (on Canvas) & “Don’t Explain the Joke” . Write 1-2 paragraphs considering the quote and the article. Do you agree or disagree with the authors? What’s the value in dissecting humor?	Are we ruining humor by studying it? Also, <i>Elements of Style</i> explorations.
	August 31 st	ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE TOMORROW (09/01) AT 4PM EST.	Checking in after two weeks. Also: what is the experience of language? What is a “linguistic system”, and how do we measure it?
Week 3	September 5 th	Read Chapter 1 of Language Files (on Canvas). Answer worksheet questions (on Canvas) in your journal.	What are the major components of a linguistic system, and how do we distinguish them?

⁴ Please limit your piece(s) to visual or textual jokes; videos will be difficult to share in a classroom setting! Transcriptions of videos are totally fine, though some of the humor may be lost without the intended delivery.

	September 7 th	<p>Watch a short clip of Kevin Hart stand-up comedy. Then, watch this interview where Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and Kevin Hart impersonate each other. After, write one paragraph (minimally) about <i>each</i> clip, noting the language and discourse that you find interesting. Consider who the intended audiences are for each clip, and think about how the actors try to reach their audience with language.</p>	<p>How do we extract linguistic information from real language data?</p> <p>Also, introduction to writing for an audience.</p>
Week 4	September 12 th	<p>Read the three film reviews that your small group has selected (as decided in the previous class). Write a brief passage (2-3 paragraphs) about</p> <p>a) the intended audience for each review, and b) how effectively the writer has targeted that audience.</p>	<p>What is an audience, and how do we reach one with our writing?</p>
	September 14 th	<p>ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE TOMORROW (09/15) AT 4PM EST.</p>	<p>What’s the relationship between humor, language, and culture?</p> <p>Also, some good writing practices (editing, reverse outlining, condensing, expanding).</p>

Week 5	September 19 th	<p>First, read the Reverse Outlining handout (on Canvas, in General Resources). Then, read Jiang et al. (2019). Write down three points that you found interesting, and three questions about things you found confusing or difficult. Be specific. Then, construct a “reverse outline” of one section of the paper; please do not reverse outline the introductory or Conclusion sections.</p>	<p>How does culture affect what’s funny? Also, breaking down the structure of formal writing.</p>
	September 21 st	<p>Read “Seriously, the Joke is Dead” and write a brief synopsis (~1-2 paragraphs). Consider the following questions: What does the article claim has happened to the joke? Do you note any ironies regarding the form of the article? How would you respond to this article in a more formal piece of writing, given what we’ve learned in this class? Then, read “What’s So Funny? The Science of Why We Laugh?” (On Canvas). The article presents a number of theories on why we laugh. In 1-2 paragraphs, support one of the theories with your own ideas and experiences.</p>	<p>Is the joke dead?! Also, learning how to workshop writing constructively.</p>

Week 6	September 26 th	Read Kreuz & Roberts (1993) . Answer the worksheet questions (on Canvas) in your journal. Watch the three clips of satirical comedy (on Canvas).	What do satire and parody reveal? Also, more analysis on writing an argument.
	September 28 th	Complete the “Identifying humorous devices” worksheet on Canvas. Prepare to share your ideas and analyses.	Grouping material together. Also, some reflection on the writing voice and how to revise your own writing.
Week 7	October 3 rd	Bring a draft of Assignment #3 to class for paper workshops. Paper or virtual copies are fine; just be prepared to share!	WORKSHOP DAY
	October 5 th	ASSIGNMENT #3 DUE TOMORROW (10/06) AT 4PM EST.	What is visual humor, and how does it manifest?
Week 8	October 10 th	-----	NO CLASS (Fall break)

	October 12 th	Read Chapter 6 of Scott McCloud's book <i>Understanding Comics</i> . Write a 3-4 paragraph response to the chapter. How does McCloud's chapter use the techniques that it itself describes? How do some aspects of reading and constructing comics reshape our understanding of the "Big Three" characteristics? Cite specific pages and frames from the text.	What are the linguistics of images? Also, close reading with visuals.
Week 9	October 17 th	Read this article by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on how to create a comic. Then, read this short review of a Spider-Man comic . ⁵ Write 1-2 paragraphs for each article, focusing on how the authors talk about the comic itself. What are some trends you notice?	How do we write about visuals? Also, comic passing activity.
	October 19 th	ASSIGNMENT #4 DUE TOMORROW (10/20) AT 4PM EST.	Assignment 4 Creative Bonanza Event!

⁵ Or, choose your own review from cbr.com.

Week 10	October 24 th	Read pp. 61-85 of Chapter 3 of <i>The Pun Also Rises</i> and complete the relevant worksheet (on Canvas).	How can we present research in an engaging fashion? Also, looking at the structure of formal writing.
	October 26 th	Read van Mulken et al. (2008) . Write a short passage (2-3 paragraphs) that engages with the following questions: how is the paper structured? What could you follow? What gave you the most trouble? From a linguistic standpoint, what are some patterns that distinguish this paper from Pollack's chapter? As usual, be specific! You do not need to read through the statistical results too closely (though you can, if you want!).	How do we engage with more difficult texts? Also, discussion of research proposals, abstracts, and running an experiment.
Week 11	October 31 st	Bring in a two-paragraph abstract/proposal that covers the major question(s) and idea(s) you are interested in pursuing. Specifics can be found on Canvas. Additionally, compose a paragraphs on the abstract/proposal writing process. What was easy? What was hard? What was something that was unexpected?	PROPOSAL DAY

	November 2 nd	Bring in a rough outline of your paper. Don't just do the major sections; add some subsections and content to your outline based on your ideas. If you have conducted some research already, report on what you've done. If you haven't, report on the kind of work that you plan to do.	WORKSHOP DAY
Week 12	November 7 th	-----	NO CLASS
	November 9 th	Bring in a draft of your paper (minimally two written pages, with a detailed outline of the sections that are incomplete so your readers can identify the major narrative).	WORKSHOP DAY
Week 13	November 14 th	Read " The Importance of Stupidity in Scientific Research ". Write down your favorite line from the article. Then, read the first four sections of Levi-Ari & McKay (2022) , as well as the General Discussion. ⁶ Write a short paragraph about how the findings of this paper relate to this course. What is sound symbolism, and how does it manifest in humor? Finally, bring in a paragraph from your paper that is giving you trouble.	How does research writing fit into the larger context of writing and culture?

⁶ You can read the whole paper (~10 pages), if you'd like more detail on how they actually implement their experiments!

	November 16 th	ASSIGNMENT #5 DUE 11/17-11/20 AT 4PM EST 11/20.	How're we doing? What's next? Also, reflecting on the research process and doing some in-class writing activities.
Week 14	November 21 st	Read Lefcourt & Katz (1993) (on Canvas). For each section past the introduction, write down two key points. Then, consider the article as a whole – write 1-2 paragraphs that engage with the material.	What are the benefits of humor for the self?
	November 23 rd	-----	NO CLASS
----- THANKSGIVING BREAK -----			
Week 15	November 28 th	Watch 14 Minutes of Comedians Reaffirming Mental Health Struggles . Then, write 2-3 paragraphs about some linguistic patterns you note across the various comedians? How do they engage the audience? How do they structure their jokes?	How do we engage personal issues with humor?

November 30th

Watch [this AI-generated comedy special](#). Write 1-2 paragraphs thinking about what the AI does well. Is it funny in the way humans are funny? Explain your reasoning.

How does humor help us engage with our humanity? Also, looking at humor as a way of building community.

Week 16

December 5th

NO CLASS

----- STUDY PERIOD -----

Week 17

Sometime this week...

**FINAL PORTFOLIO DUE
TOMORROW (DATE)
AT 4PM EST.**

NO CLASS