Part 8

You are going to read an article by a psychologist about laughter. For questions **47 – 56**, choose from the sections (**A – D**). The sections may be chosen more than once.

Mark your answers **on the separate answer sheet**.

Which section

comments on which person laughs within a verbal exchange?	**47**	
uses a comparison with other physical functions to support an idea?	**48**	
gives reasons why understanding laughter supplies very useful insights?	**49**	
refers to someone who understood the self-perpetuating nature of laughter?	**50**	
cites a study that involved watching people without their knowledge?	**51**	
describes laughter having a detrimental effect?	**52**	
criticises other research for failing to consider a key function of laughter?	**53**	
explains that laughing does not usually take precedence over speaking?	**54**	
describes people observing themselves?	**55**	
encourages checking that a proposition is correct?	**56**	

Why do people laugh?

Psychologist Robert Provine writes about why and when we laugh.

A

In 1962, what began as an isolated fit of laughter in a group of schoolgirls in Tanzania rapidly rose to epidemic proportions. Contagious laughter spread from one individual to the next and between communities. Fluctuating in intensity, the laughter epidemic lasted for around two and a half years and during this time at least 14 schools were closed and about 1,000 people afflicted. Laughter epidemics, big and small, are universal. Laughter yoga, an innovation of Madan Kataria of Mumbai, taps into contagious laughter for his *Laughter Yoga* clubs. Members gather in public places to engage in laughter exercises to energise the body and improve health. Kataria realised that only laughter is needed to stimulate laughter – no jokes are necessary. When we hear laughter, we become beasts of the herd, mindlessly laughing in turn, producing a behavioural chain reaction that sweeps through our group.

B

Laughter is a rich source of information about complex social relationships, if you know where to look. Learning to 'read' laughter is particularly valuable because laughter is involuntary and hard to fake, providing uncensored, honest accounts of what people really think about each other. It is a decidedly social signal. The social context of laughter was established by 72 student volunteers in my classes, who recorded their own laughter, its time of occurrence and social circumstance in small notebooks (laugh logbooks) during a one-week period. The sociality of laughter was striking. My logbook keepers laughed about 30 times more when they were around others than when they were alone – laughter almost disappeared among solitary subjects.

C

Further clues about the social context of laughter came from the surreptitious observation of 1,200 instances of conversational laughter among anonymous people in public places. My colleagues and I noted the gender of the speaker and audience (listener), whether the speaker or the audience laughed, and what was said immediately before laughter occurred. Contrary to expectation, most conversational laughter was not a response to jokes or humorous stories. Fewer than 20% of pre-laugh comments were remotely joke-like or humorous. Most laughter followed banal remarks such as 'Are you sure?' and 'It was nice meeting you too.' Mutual playfulness, in-group feeling and positive emotional tone – not comedy – mark the social settings of most naturally occurring laughter. Another counterintuitive discovery was that the average speaker laughs about 46% more often than the audience. This contrasts with the scenario in stand-up comedy – a type of comedy performance in which a non-laughing speaker presents jokes to a laughing audience. Comedy performance in general proves an inadequate model for everyday conversational laughter. Analyses that focus only on audience behaviour (a common approach) are obviously limited because they neglect the social nature of the laughing relationship.

D

Amazingly, we somehow navigate society, laughing at just the right times, while not consciously knowing what we are doing. In our sample of 1,200 laughter episodes, the speaker and the audience seldom interrupted the phrase structure of speech with a ha-ha. Thus, a speaker may say 'You are wearing that? Ha-ha,' but rarely 'You are wearing… ha-ha… that?' The occurrence of laughter during pauses, at the end of phrases, and before and after statements and questions suggests that a neurologically based process governs the placement of laughter. Speech is dominant over laughter because it has priority access to the single vocalisation channel, and laughter does not violate the integrity of phrase structure. Laughter in speech is similar to punctuation in written communication. If punctuation of speech by laughter seems unlikely, consider that breathing and coughing also punctuate speech. Better yet, why not test my theory of punctuation by examining the placement of laughter in conversation around you, focusing on the placement of ha-ha laughs. It's a good thing that these competing actions are neurologically orchestrated. How complicated would our lives be if we had to plan when to breathe, talk and laugh.