



The French philosopher Henri Bergson thought there were three basic elements for a comic situation: The person who is comic can't be sociable; the audience can't worry for the safety or emotions of the comic foil (because laughter and powerful emotions don't mix); and the comic foil must act without too much thought. Tragedy deals with individuals and comedy deals with classes of people. Comedy shows us characters that don't conform to society and don't bother to read the unwritten rules every social being obeys to one degree or another. My *Oxford Universal Dictionary* defines humor as "that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement." It also describes humor as "the faculty of perceiving or expressing what is ludicrous or amusing." My *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* differs from this definition slightly: "the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous."

I ask students many times why they think another student's work is amusing. Few have good answers to the question. I don't know how to define humor either—a quality of unexpectedness, a surprising twist of events, a grouping of incongruous things together? In the 1980s, Attorney General Edwin Meese threw up his hands when trying to define pornography for a federal commission on the subject he chaired: "I know pornography when I see it."

Franz Kafka read his stories aloud to friends, and he laughed so much he often could not finish the readings. One does not necessarily read Kafka's fiction as sidesplitting humor—but it might help to think of his stories and novels that way. Samuel Beckett is grim, but at heart he is a comedian, a man fascinated by human foibles, by our linguistic capacity to name our own worst fears in plain, humble words. The man who slips on a banana peel does not find it amusing, but the woman sitting nearby does. The poet Baudelaire thought laughter was a sign of the laughter's superiority over the laughée. The philosopher Hobbes said

laughter was "sudden glory." Freud thought a joke was a way of expressing what was usually inexpressible.

Most of these exercises use the essential structures of humor as vehicles of this sudden glory or desire to say the unsayable rather than as a means of simply being funny. But they also help you to cause mirth with your writing. A laugh-out-loud moment, even in the most serious story, does something almost nothing else can do. Humor is a kind of grease that keeps your stories rolling smoothly along their rails. In our infancy, humor starts with the tickle response. A baby's smile and laugh may offer relief to parents who might otherwise be overwhelmed by the care that babies require—so humor is, first of all, a defense mechanism.



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STAND-UP. Write a stand-up comedy monologue, fitting it into a story situation you've already begun working on. Don't make it obvious to your reader that you are doing a stand-up routine—just tell a story *as if* you were doing a monologue in front of a smoky, irritable audience, with a *Late Show* talent scout scribbling notes at the bar in the back. 600 words

THE USUAL METHOD of the stand-up comic's monologue is apparently casual connections. For instance, a woman once started a monologue with the simple idea of bad hair:

As a five-year old, you never had bad hair days. You woke up with hair straight up, and you said, "I look great! I slept in my swimsuit and I feel wonderful!" Mother made clothes for me—horrible outfits. She probably laughed herself to death. I got back at her. When I told her I was gay I said it was because of those clothes.

Note the leap from plain detail to plain detail—the mother making clothes to the coming-out declaration. We are not expecting this transition (nor, for that matter, the simpler transition from bad hair to mother making clothes). But the transitions are funny, and they affect us and shock us, even in this day and age.



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THE WIT AND THE PENDULUM. Pit a character that uses jokes, puns, or other kinds of witticism against a situation that is not at all funny. Play the two elements—humor and seriousness, even terror—off one another. Remember that brevity is the soul of wit—good natural humorists practice extraordinary compression of details. The pun in the title is on the Edgar Allan Poe story “The Pit and the Pendulum.” Remember that most of us groan at puns, no matter how good they are. 500 words

HOLLYWOOD REGULARLY uses the ironic, joking response to danger—in the *Die Hard* movies, for example. Be careful not to make the tendency this character has to joke a symptom of his bravado. The humor should be a helpless defense mechanism. A friend of mine at work years ago walked into a room in the midst of a conversation a colleague and I were having about my grandfather, who was dying at the time. Judy, who knew and sympathized with the situation, nevertheless said, “Speaking of dying, I’m just dying for a cigarette. Anybody got one?” My response to the lightening of the mood was a surge of affection for Judy. We often laugh in the face of our greatest fears. Work with this idea of humor and horror intermingled.



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THE JOKE. Use a joke you like or loathe in a fragment of a story as a turning point. The joke should be relatively short, and it might be better if the joke is