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Recommended Citation

Louviere, Hala, "Bad Puns: It's How Eye Roll: Humor Writing as a Technique to Engage and Strengthen Writers" (2020). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 62.

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Bad Puns: It's How Eye Roll: Humor Writing as a Technique to Engage and Strengthen Writers

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Abstract

Much research has been done on why to use humor writing, but a lack of research on when to use humor writing exists. The researcher argues that when humor writing is used in scholarly and analytical writing, it can engage uninterested students and improve their writing through authorial voice. Previous studies support the researcher's thesis; young adults, who frequently consume humor through social media and other modes, can appreciate writing more by combining it with a technique they are familiar with and enjoy. This appreciation also motivates students to insert more of their voice, which then improves their writing.

Keywords: Humor, puns, engagement, motivation, voice

Many students who visit the writing center do so because it is required for their classes. Even their classes may be required; at our university, students must take Introduction to Writing: Academic Prose and Intermediate Writing: Research Writing in a Persuasive Mode. Some of these students enjoy their writing classes and are passionate about their writing assignments. Many, however, do not find the same joy and attend the writing center begrudgingly. Tutors act not only as instructors and sounding boards for these students but also as motivators and advertisers. In tutoring sessions with disinterested students, tutors may struggle to engage the student in their work and the discussion. I offer humor writing as a solution to these difficult sessions. Humor can be the missing element to these students' writing interest and success. I compile existing research about how and why to use humor writing and provide insight into when to use humor writing. Tutors should teach and encourage humor writing because it increases students' interest in their writing and adds voice.

Before teaching humor writing, tutors must understand how to use it. Humor writing is the inclusion of humor that is frequently found in verbal or physical texts into written texts. It can be used in titles, comparisons, conclusions, and many other areas of students' writing. Tutors must work with students to determine the appropriateness of humor writing, but it is important to remember that humor writing is permissible in far more writing types than students may expect. In complex argumentative essays, puns can help readers quickly understand the argument because it is presented in a simple, interesting way. In poetry, humor can alleviate tension and heavy moods, making tough topics more approachable. When considering humor use, the key is that students must have strong content in order for their humor writing to be accepted by most instructors. Humor can be accepted in professional writing as long as it is not the only device a

writer uses to further their writing. An overreliance on humor may indicate unprofessionalism, flippantness, or lack of knowledge about the topic. Humor is an accent, the finishing touches to complete a piece.

Much of humor writing relies on puns and homophones, as they can be easily communicated without a verbal delivery. Attardo considers two characteristics of humor to be essential to its success: the humorous text exists on two different scripts (levels) and the two scripts are opposite in some sense (3). For example, the joke, “Bad puns: it’s how eye roll,” has the “I roll” script implying that bad puns are part of the speaker’s lifestyle and the “eye roll” script implying that the speaker’s bad puns make people roll their eyes. These are opposite in the sense that they can exist without one another and are related only in the context of the joke. Many jokes are structured around these characteristics unintentionally, as they are an inherent part of the English language. Attardo does point out that these characteristics are broad and can lead to misunderstanding, though (3-4). One important consideration that writers, both tutors and students, must have is “Will my reader recognize and understand both scripts this text is compatible with?” If the answer to this question is no, then the humor will not be well received by the writer’s audience. Tutors should strive to help their students develop humor writing that answers yes to this question.

Humor writing can engage students who otherwise are not interested in writing or their topic. Goebel argues that humor can make writing enjoyable and comfortable, allowing students to truly learn and improve their writing (38). He points out that many young adults are drawn to and favor humorous personalities, especially in media (38). Humor can give students a path to discovering enjoyment within their writing. A student I once tutored was tasked with a letter to

someone who could fix something they dislike. They were not excited to complete this assignment but agreed to use our time together to get a head start on it. While brainstorming topics together, I learned that this student, a music lover, disliked mumble rap. They told me this jokingly and seemed ready to move on to more “important” issues, but I inquired further. We eventually found a rapper of influence that this student thought could end the mumble rap trend. After I reassured them that they could use this topic, even if it was not the most world-changing, the student was far more interested in completing the assignment. They excitedly walked me through the points they would make to this rapper and left the session ready to keep working. By validating this student’s desire to use humor in their writing, I was able to light the writing spark inside them. Tutors should discuss humor writing with their students to determine if the student would be interested in using the technique. This conversation is tutors’ opportunity to motivate their frequently uninterested writers.

Tutors should use their knowledge of humor writing to help the student add voice to their writing. Often times, students consider writing that is not creative writing to be void of emotion and authorial voice. However, voice is just as essential in scholarly and analytical works. Students use humor writing in many aspects of their life, especially within widespread social media. Tutors must ask the student what they could compare to and consider funny alongside their topics. Encouraging students to strengthen their authorial voice will bring their writing to the next level. Hall claims that bringing students’ voice into their writing through humor allows their writing to become more than their assignment and extend beyond even the university (26). Teaching students humor writing will not only improve the paper they are working on in the session but also open the door to a new writing tool they can use for the rest of their lives.

Students should be able to enjoy the work they are doing, even if that work is required. Humor writing can be the venue to build this enjoyment. Tutors should help their students consider the appropriateness of humor in their assignment and teach them about the two scripts humor must work on. Through tutors' use of humor writing, students will engage in their writing and improve their work through the addition of voice.

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