

**TAMALPAIS UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT**  
**Larkspur, California**

**Course of Study and Unit Plans**

The Language of Humor

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The Language of Humor is a new, semester-long course to be offered as a junior/senior elective for Language Arts students.

The focus of the course is to look at humorous texts and learn what makes them humorous. We will study novels (e.g. *The River Why*, *Confederacy of Dunces*), plays (e.g. *I Hate Hamlet*), novellas (*Candide*), short stories (Twain's "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"), political texts (O'Rourke's *Parliament of Whores*), personal essays (Sedaris, Plimpton, Benchley), poems (Nash), and standup routines (Cosby, Wright, Pryor). We will supplement these texts with excerpts from humorous films when appropriate (Chaplin) and visual texts such as cartoons from *The New Yorker*.

In addition to studying what makes something funny, we will examine the purpose and function of humor today and in the past. We will examine humor as a reaction to setbacks, humor as a tool of power, humor as inspiration, and humor as criticism, to name a few. Because what makes something funny is often a matter of taste, we will examine how culture, age, family, intelligence, and religion affect our tastes in humor.

Writing in the course will range from analyses of humor to stand-up routines to humorous personal essays.

Finally, so much of humor comes from a sense of timing and rhythm, so students in the course will listen to humor, from stand-up comedy to fictional prose, to learn how authors and comedians create that rhythm.

This course addresses the following Tam 21<sup>st</sup> Century goals:

- acquire, manage and use knowledge and skills
- think critically and creatively
- practice self-directed learning, decision making, and problem solving
- pursue individual goals and aspirations
- develop skills needed for effective teamwork
- understand individual and cultural differences
- prepare for participation in a rapidly changing global community
- gain skills for success in the work place, and
- understand the relevance of the high school experience to his/her life

The Language of Humor helps students attain these goals in a myriad of ways. Through close reading and analyses of texts, students acquire and use the literacy skills that all adults need to thrive in life after high school.

Through studying humor—how it is created, how it is used, and how it is received—students will gain an understanding of individual and cultural differences.

Because the course is designed in a way that gives students choice in the texts they read and the assignments they write, Language of Humor allows students to practice self-directed learning, decision making, and problem solving. These choices also allow students to pursue individual goals and aspirations.

Through Socratic seminar discussions, peer response groups, and a variety of other collaborative activities, students will develop skills needed for effective teamwork.

A byproduct of studying humor is, hopefully, the development and refining of one's own sense of humor, a skill that is vital to participation in a global community and an important trait of those who succeed in the work place.

This course addresses the following Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Communicate articulately, effectively, and persuasively when speaking and writing.
2. Read and analyze material in a variety of disciplines.
3. Use technology as a tool to access information, analyze and solve problems, and communicate ideas.
4. Interpret experience, create, and/or perform artistic work.
5. Demonstrate school-to-work/post-secondary transition skills and knowledge.
6. Demonstrate knowledge, skills, and self-discipline necessary to achieve and maintain physical and emotional well-being.

## **II. STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES AND STATE STANDARDS**

A. Students will do the following:

1. Writing
  - a. Use the stages in the writing process, especially responding, revising, and editing (R/LAF W W/S 1.0; 1.9);
  - b. Apply basic grammar and appropriate vocabulary in the context of their writing (R/LAF W W/O 1.0);
  - c. Write well-developed essays using the thesis statement effectively to focus the essay, and practice patterns of organization, such as

- chronology, classification, and steps in a process, with appropriate transitional techniques, language and form to suit purpose and audience (R/LAF W W/S 1.3);
- d. Draw generalizations from recorded observation and experience—e.g., from stories, poems, journal entries, autobiographical and biographical pieces, descriptions and accounts—and support them with convincing evidence and examples (R/LAF W W/A 2.2);
  - e. Develop an interpretation that uses convincing textual evidence for support and explain the interpretation rationally to convince the reader of its soundness (R/LAF W W/A 2.2 a - e);
  - f. Examine ideas and information from a variety of sources and draw conclusions about the point and purpose of that information and to evaluate the conclusions and determine whether or not they are sound (R/LAF W W/A 2.4 d);
  - g. Analyze information from various sources through systematic note taking, integrate material from outside sources into their own work, and acknowledge those sources (R/LAF W W/S 1.6).
2. Literature/Reading
- a. Understand and use the language of literary criticism, such as setting, characterization, foreshadowing, symbolism, and metaphor; consult sources to enrich understanding; recognize the relationship of specific incidents to theme; understand an author's method of narration, i.e., who tells the story and how far the narrator is from the action; be aware of and understand shifts in point of view (R/LAF R L/RA 3.0 S/F 3.1; N/A 3.2, 3.3, 3.4);
  - b. Put ideas in one's own words through such devices as paraphrase, *précis*, modeling, unscrambling sample passages; recognize that re-reading enhances the reader's understanding and appreciation;
  - c. Determine the author's point of view and distinguish his or her bias from established fact (R/LAF R C/A 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5);
  - d. Recognize the importance of reading beyond the assigned works and use outside sources of reference; refine the use of research techniques;
  - e. Develop a greater understanding of the contributions of ethnic groups by studying their traditions, their cultural stance, their similarities and differences (R/LAF R L/RA 3.5 b).
3. Speaking and Listening
- When speaking, students will:
- a. Function effectively in class discussion by answering and asking questions coherently and by clarifying responses with clear explanations; conceive and develop ideas that are soundly reasoned and well supported;
  - b. Become more proficient in the various roles in editing and response writing groups;

- c. Learn argumentation techniques that allow both sides of a question to surface; learn skills in logic and reasoning to support arguments on conflicting sides of a question (R/LAF L/S O/D 1.5, 1.6);
- d. Give careful attention to preplanning a speech; develop a regard for the audience with respect to gaining attention, sustaining interest, making efficient use of time; learn skills in organizing for various modes of presentation: analysis, persuasion, explanation, interpretation, direction, and comparison (R/LAF L/S O/D 1.7 A/E 1.13);
- e. Practice oral interpretation of literature, using the techniques of emphasis, expression, dramatic pause, inflection; practice parts in dramas, attempting realistic character identity, fluency in reading dialogue, and appropriate tone and mood (R/LAF L/S S/A 2.3 a—e; 2.5).

When listening, students will:

- a. Develop techniques that promote supportive, polite concern for the speaker, and learn the skills necessary to offer tactful, constructive criticism.

**C. Student Assessment:**

Students will be assessed through a variety of indicators including homework, group work, oral presentations, visuals related to the reading, quizzes on the literature, essays, and other writing assignments.

Students will be expected to take an essay examination that requires them to apply the thinking and writing skills they have developed in order to synthesize and analyze material from three to four major works covered during the semester.

Students will be expected to support their main ideas with specific examples from the works under discussion.

For a more complete description of assessments, please refer to section III, D of this course description.

### **III. UNITS OF INSTRUCTION**

#### **A. Major Units of Instruction**

Unit I – A Quick History of Humor and Introduction of Terms

Unit II – Political Humor and Satire

Unit III – Literary Humor

Unit IV – Oral Humor

Unit V – Visual Humor

## **B. Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions**

### **Enduring Understandings**

Students will understand that

- humor is a tool of criticism
- humor is a tool of power
- there are techniques associated with creating humor
- there are reasons why different people find different things funny

### **Essential Questions**

- Why do people create humorous texts?
- What makes something funny?
- What is the effect of humor on the individual?
- Is there a social need for humor?
- Can something be universally humorous or does humor depend on race, age, religion, gender, etc.?

## **C. Knowledge and Skills**

Students will be able to:

- read (comprehend, interpret, and analyze) a variety of texts independently and consistently
- identify what makes something funny to them and to others
- contribute meaningfully to group discussions
- support claims with a variety of evidence
- compose a variety of writing assignments based on purpose and audience
- respond thoughtfully to their classmates ideas
- research the history of a famous comedian
- apply knowledge of humor terms to their reading of a humorous text

## **D. Student Assessments**

### **Unit I – A Quick History of Humor and Introduction of Terms**

- End of unit test where students will be asked to both define terms and identify forms of humor in a variety of texts

### **Unit II – Political Humor and Satire**

- Formal, Socratic seminar discussions on key texts
- Reading quizzes to check that students completed the reading and understood the reading
- In class, timed write, in which students analyze the humor (or lack thereof) in a previously unseen political text.
- Formal process piece in which students write a two to three page satire that criticizes and/or pokes fun at a local, state, or national current event.

### **Unit III – Literary Humor**

- Formal, Socratic seminar discussion on central text.
- Reading quizzes to check that students completed the reading and understood the reading
- In class timed write in which students analyze the humor (or lack thereof) in a previously unseen humorous short story or personal essay.
- Formal process piece in which students will have the choice to either write a humorous short story or a humorous personal essay.

### **Unit IV – Oral Humor**

- Students will deliver an original, three to five minute stand-up comedy routine.
- Formal process piece in which students research the lives and humor of three stand-up comics and compare and contrast those artists.

### **Unit V – Visual Humor**

- Daily submissions of *New Yorker* cartoon taglines.
- In class, timed write response to a humorous movie.

## **IV. METHODS, MATERIALS, AND RESOURCES**

### **A. Methods**

This course will utilize a variety of instructional methods described below. Although these methods are broken down into reading, writing, and speaking, many of them overlap disciplines. This list is representative of the methods we will use; it is not a complete list. Other methods will be used as student learning indicates their need.

#### Reading

- Paired reading with a partner to hear the timing of humor out loud.
- Read alouds in which students read a text and stop intermittently to make explicit the conversations going on inside their heads as they try to make sense of the text: in doing so students will learn how to ask questions, predict, re-read, make personal connections, use context to learn new vocabulary, and activate prior knowledge.
- Dialectical journals where students write a response to a small chunk of text.
- Visual dialecticals where students respond to a chunk of text using images, both found and created.
- Reading quizzes where students are given an opportunity to prove they understood what they were asked to read independently.
- Copying text: in this exercise students write word for word the text of a published author to mimic the way that he or she uses language (diction, syntax, punctuation) in the creation of humor.

- Letters to the author: in these activities students take their questions about, and/or responses to, a text and share them with an audience other than the teacher. These letters will be sent, providing students with incentive to present themselves in the best possible light.
- Informal discussions where students share their responses to the text and develop those responses more deeply while listening to how their peers responded to the same text.
- Formal discussions where students prepare responses to questions they receive before they read the text. (At first these questions will be created by the teacher; later they will be created by the students themselves.)
- Annotating texts with marginalia in which students identify and label humor techniques.
- Independent research to learn the background on the topics that are being satirized in our humor and politics unit.

### Writing

- Informal personal responses to a text focusing on whether or not the student finds the text humorous and why.
- Writing a formal stand-up comedy routine in which students learn how to organize an oral presentation by the linking together of its components.
- Writing a formal expository analysis of a humorous text. This assignment will teach students how to use a thesis and textual evidence to develop a central idea.
- Writing a personal essay in which students play with chronology, description, and figurative language to create a piece that their audience will find humorous.
- Writing a formal research paper in which students synthesize the material from a variety of sources and properly cite those sources.
- During all of our major writing assignments, students will use important steps in the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, peer response, and revision.
- Students will learn about the world of publishing and also about proper business letter writing when they send query letters to publishers in the hopes of having their pieces published.
- When we study individual humor writing techniques, students will practice those techniques, using the models as a guide. These practice sessions will often be short exercises focusing on techniques such as misdirection, punning, understatement, exaggeration, etc.
- One liners. Cartoon captions that help students develop their ability to observe and make connections.

### Speaking

- Informal discussions where students share their responses to the text and develop those responses more deeply while listening to how their peers responded to the same text.

- Formal discussions where students prepare responses to questions they receive before they read the text. (At first these questions will be created by the teacher; later they will be created by the students themselves.)
- Formal presentations where students prepare a stand-up comedy routine modeled after a comedian they have researched.
- Informal joke telling as ice breakers at the start of class.

## **B. Materials**

### Books and Plays

*America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, John Stewart  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, William Shakespeare  
*A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson  
*Candide*, Voltaire  
*Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy Toole  
*Dave Barry Turns 40*, Dave Barry  
*I Hate Hamlet*, Paul Rudnick  
*Me Talk Pretty Some Day*, David Sedaris  
*Parliament of Whores*, P.J. O'Rourke  
*The Best of Plimpton*, George Plimpton  
*The River Why*, David James Duncan  
*Stiff*, Mary Roach

### Essays

"A Modest Proposal," Jonathon Swift  
 Assorted Essays, Amy Sedaris  
 Assorted Essays, Anna Quindlen  
 Assorted Essays, Annie Dillard

### Audio Recordings

"To Russell, My Brother, Whom I Slept With", Bill Cosby  
 "Seven Dirty Words", George Carlin  
 "Richard Pryor: Live in Concert", Richard Pryor

### Magazines

*The New Yorker*  
*The Onion*  
*Mad Magazine*

### Websites

[www.funnyordie.com](http://www.funnyordie.com)  
[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

### Movies

*City Lights*, Charlie Chaplin

*Blazing Saddles*, Mel Brooks  
*Jesus is Magic*, Sarah Silverman

Short Stories

“The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” Mark Twain  
“The Pension Grillparzer,” John Irving

Comics

*Ernie Pook's Comeek*, Lynda Barry

**C. Technology**

This course will use the following types of technology:

- Personal computers and word processing software for all major writing assignments.
- Websites (e.g. You Tube, Funny or Die) to access humorous material.
- The Tam District Moodle* for online forums.
- Elmo overhead projection cameras as a way of reviewing student work and annotating texts.
- Digital video cameras to capture student presentations for later self-reflection.
- Library databases to access information used in student research.

**D. School to Career Goals**

Because all of the texts for this course come from the “real” world, every day students will be exposed to potential careers that involve the use of humor. Students will hopefully leave this class imagining that they, too, could become a newspaper columnist, an essayist, a cartoonist, a stand-up comic, a social critic, a political commentator, or an author of fiction.

Almost all of our units will end with students looking for areas where they can publish their work. Students will learn how to write query letters and submit book proposals.

**E. Suggested Instructional Time Allocation**

Unit I – A Quick History of Humor and Introduction of Terms – 2 weeks

Unit II – Political Humor and Satire –4 weeks

Unit III – Literary Humor - 7 weeks

Unit IV – Oral Humor – 3 weeks

Unit V – Visual Humor – 2 weeks

**V. TROUBLE-SHOOTING GUIDE**

There are two areas of potential trouble-shooting for the new teacher to this course.

- A. Humor that is offensive to a gender, race, religion, or world view could be an area of potential conflict. Handling discussions around these texts (e.g. the Danish

cartoon of Mohammed) will require a careful touch.

- B. Because this course looks at what makes us laugh, there is the potential for students to not take the work itself seriously.

## **VI. COURSE ASSESSMENT**

Language of Humor will be assessed through formal and informal surveys of the students.

Course and unit goals will be reviewed by teacher on a regular basis.

If grade distributions match the grade distributions of other junior/senior electives, than the growth in enrollment over the first five years should be an indication of the success of the course.

## **VII. GENERAL INFORMATION**

The Language of Humor is a five credit course open to juniors and seniors. Second semester sophomores may take the course with the approval of site administrators.

### **A. Prerequisites**

There are no prerequisites to taking The Language of Humor.

### **B. Requirements Met**

This course may be used in partial fulfillment of the Language Arts graduation requirement.

This course is pending approval towards the “b” requirement for UC/CSU admissions.

Approved by Board of Trustees: February 8, 2011