The Rhetoric of Humor: Reading and Creating Comedic Texts
to Enhance Student Writing, Literacy, and Community
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A digital copy of this handout and additional materials are available at
www.UniverseAsText.com under the post “The Rhetoric of Humor”.

Alignment of Unit with Common Core State Standards
The humor unit is part of our sophomore curriculum. We have it set as our final module under
Overarching Enduring Understanding 4: Collaborative, self-directed learners obtain, analyze,
and synthesize information from a variety of resources to express information, change
perspectives, clarify thinking, and make informed decisions. See below for the module overview
and accompanying standards for grade 10 ELA.

Module 4B. The Rhetoric of Humor
In this unit, students will use a variety of humorous texts to identify and evaluate the use of
rhetorical strategies. They will recognize the valuable and often serious purposes behind texts
that are designed to make us laugh, by analyzing the medium of a text, the use of irony, parody,
or satire, well-crafted structure, connotation/denotation, and the discrepancy between what an
author says and what he or she truly means. Focusing primarily on humor as a vehicle for
persuasion and a call to social awareness, this unit provides students with the opportunity to
collaborate with peers on a humorous topical publication. In this final assessment of the year,
students develop leadership skills, apply research and synthesis abilities, and formulate their own
rhetorical strategies to achieve an intended effect through sophisticated authorship.

Focus Standards

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<tr>
<th>Reading Literature (RL)</th>
<th>Reading Informational Text (RI)</th>
<th>Writing (W)</th>
<th>Speaking and Listening (SL)</th>
<th>Language (L)</th>
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Unit Set-Up and Plan

Week One:
Introduction: What is Humor? What is and is not humorous?
Investigation of rhetorical devices/strategies
Satire and Parody Study (and parody project)

Week Two:
Pathos, Ethos, and Logos (define, examine, and analyze)
Hyperbole and Incongruity (How can humor persuade?)
Mockumentary study (Humor as persuasion, continued)
Written analysis of a humorous piece (formative assessment)

Week Three:
Mockumentary project (assess ability to effectively use rhetorical techniques)
Wordplay and puns
Assessment of knowledge of rhetorical terms
Analysis of slapstick and absurdity (analyzing rhetorical choices of film creators)

Weeks Four and Five:
Introduction of final assignment (What is a zine?)
Collaboration and planning time
Work time for zines
Presentation and exchange of zines
Self-assessment/reflection piece
**Rhetorical Strategies - Applied Knowledge**
**Student Example Written Analysis for YouTube video “The Majestic Plastic Bag”**
Ellie L., grade 10

“The Majestic Plastic Bag” by HealTheBay.org is a mockumentary about the life cycle of a plastic bag. The creators basically took the structure and style of a nature show and put the “life” of a plastic bag in that setting. Although it means to be humorous, the overall purpose of the clip is to raise awareness of plastic going into the ocean, and asking that we help prevent it.

Although it sounds and appears to be serious, it’s actually very humorous. The speaker uses a mock-serious tone, which adds to the humor. They use logos in their argument by showing the real, large amounts of plastic in the ocean, but make it humorous by calling it “a plastic oasis.” The creators also use reversal by pretending that the plastic bag is an actual creature. Basically, the whole clip is an example of incongruity because viewers didn’t expect any of the clip to happen. Also, the piece is filled with hyperbole. Even the title is an example of hyperbole, because it’s an exaggeration to call a plastic bag **majestic**. Because of the large amounts of hyperbole and incongruity, the clip becomes instantly funny. Although it’s a mockumentary, it’s also satire, because the creators have an overall serious message to show the audience through the humor.

The large amounts of absurdity in this clip and the overall irony are the things that make the clip humorous. If the piece was said in a silly tone, it just wouldn’t be the same. The speaker said his piece in a way that fools us into thinking it’s a legitimate nature show, but it’s just a parody of one. This clip is the perfect example of a mockumentary.

**Student Example Written Analysis for short fiction “Coyote vs. Acme”**
Jake M., grade 10

My rhetorical analysis will be on “Coyote vs. Acme” by Ian Frazier. This piece is about the cartoon character suing Acme for injuries, distress, and other happenings from using their products. It is set up in a sophisticated manner, so it looks just like an opening case file presented by Wile E. Coyote’s lawyer.

There were many rhetorical strategies in this text that make it so humorous. One of these was incongruity, which was shown when Frazier wrote, “My client, Mr. Wile E. Coyote, a resident of Arizona and contiguous states, does hereby bring a suit for damages against the Acme Company, a manufacturer and retail distributor of assorted merchandise” (1). This surprising incongruity between the way the words are and the subject matter adds to the effect of humor because we all know that Wile E. Coyote and Acme don’t exist and animals can’t talk or sue.

The author also uses a mock-serious tone throughout the whole piece. One example is when he says, “Mr. Coyote seeks compensation for personal injuries, loss of business income, and mental suffering caused or as a direct result of the actions and/or negligence of said company...” (3). This is humorous because it sounds completely ridiculous, but serious at the same time, which surprises us and makes us laugh.
Resource Bibliography

Classroom Text Guide
*The Kid*. Dir. Charles Chaplin. First National, 1921. Film.
*This Way Up*. Dir. Alan Smith and Adam Foulkes, 2008. Film.
Various advertisements and political cartoons