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How to Write Funny -- It's All About Timing

By Sarah Smiley

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by: **Sarah Smiley**

My Dad has this old joke that goes, "What's the most important thing about humor?" After a short pause, he interjects, "TIMING!"

I've rolled my eyes many a time over this joke.

But here's a new version for writers: "What's the most important thing about writing funny? WORDING!"

Whether you're talking about stand-up comedy or humorous writing, surprise is one of the biggest elements of laughter. (Yes, Dad, I know, "Surprise" is what your little timing-joke is really all about.)

Readers become accustomed to seeing things written a certain way. As a writer, you have a choice: give it to them the way they expect, or surprise them with something different.

Here's an example:

In my article "Does Target Shun Veterans?" I say that Internet Urban Legends are "stories that scare readers into believing such things as rat urine contaminating the tops of their canned peaches, and so forth." I could have just as easily written, "Internet Urban Legends are stories that scare readers into believing the tops of their canned food is dirty." But that wouldn't surprise anyone, and it would have made my piece just another bland "news story."

I also shook up the sentence about Internet Urban Legends by including some humorous exaggerations. Simply writing "canned food" isn't nearly as funny as being super specific and writing, "canned peaches," and being "dirty" is far more typical than having "rat urine" on your lid.

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The idea of being very specific is what comedian (and my hero) Jerry Seinfeld has built his entire career on. He doesn't just talk about flying on an airplane, he mentions everything from the really small bag of peanuts to the pilot announcing the flight play-by-play. As an audience, we laugh at these things because it's something we've experienced but never given much thought to. Who else but Seinfeld could have an entire 30-minute television show about toxic glue on envelopes?

Drawing attention to things that are common to all but seldom discussed makes people chuckle. This is mostly due to their slight embarrassment when they realize "wow, I do that," but it's also because for the first time they are paying attention to something they might not have otherwise.

But aside from timing, exaggerations and calling attention to life's quirks, sentence structure may be the ultimate weapon for writing humor. Just as a lyricist times his verses to a beat, writers need an internal rhythm to make their work conversational and surprising. There is quite a difference between writing a factual news piece and composing a humorous essay, but the biggest difference is sentence structure. Cut-and-dry news pieces need to follow a formula so that the content doesn't get lost. When

writing a narrative or essay, however, you can play with pauses (dashes, colons, etc.), italics and words to create a feeling and rhythm.

Follow these hints and your writing will be surprising and funny....AND have great timing.

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– Sarah

Smiley's syndicated column Shore Duty appears weekly in newspapers across the country.

Did You Hear The One About The Funny Quiz That Was Walking Past a Graveyard?

By Brian Fong

Q. My company publishes a monthly employee newsletter. My boss asked me to write a funny quiz. I'm not exactly a stand-up comic. Help!

A. Ah, the funny quiz. Lucky you! It's not often that a company has an official sense of humor that they are willing to display for all to read. This is going to be a great assignment for you!

A funny quiz is typically one where the questions and answers have no real purpose other than to make the quiz taker laugh. Although almost anything goes, there are some taboo subjects. Off hand I'd say that anything that pokes fun at a specific person, or groups of people, as well as anything that's anti-semitic, racial, sexual, political, or religious should be off limits. Remember, what one person

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thinks is funny can offend someone else. Even seemingly innocuous subjects like "hillbilly" or "redneck" jokes might not be funny to someone who lives in the mountains or the deep South (like I do).

You can think of a funny quiz as a series of one-liners with multiple-choice punch lines. Because you are writing for a company publication you have a built-in "affinity group" as there is bound to be some common subjects that are company related and could be made into something funny.

For example, if you work for a software development company then you might have a question that asks:

What's longer: A CEO's week or a programmer's week?

If you're not laughing then you have never had a programmer tell you that the project will be ready in a week.

You need to walk a fine line even when using subjects like this in your funny quiz. Say that your company just posted a 4th quarter loss because a new software product missed its launch date by a "programmer's week". It doesn't take a rocket scientist to determine that you are about to tick off a lot of people if you add that question to your funny quiz.

Try to avoid wornout jokes or cliches. A funny quiz should be funny, not lame. For example, still on the software train of thought, a question like...

Q. How many programmers does it take to change a lightbulb? A. None. They don't do hardware.

...is older than the mystery meat in that Tupperware container in the back of the lunchroom refrigerator. No one is going to laugh at that one. No laughing = not a funny quiz!

The best thing to do is to keep an eye out for humorous, safe things to poke fun at and then write a funny quiz question. My advice is to start right now and don't wait until one hour before deadline. The

only thing that's less funny than a lame funny quiz is no funny quiz at all!

Brian Fong runs the popular quiz site

Quiz Faq – Your solutions for the quiz.

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