

Spring 2019

HSS 403-018: The Elements of Comedy

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HSS 403: THE ELEMENTS OF COMEDY

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Supplemental site: <https://sites.google.com/a/njit.edu/hss-403-comedy/>

0. Course Description

This seminar will consider recent (approx. 1900-2019) comedy through a range of poems, stories, and films. Its focus will be on how to describe, analyze, and make an argument about quite complex, comic scenes. Accordingly, written work will focus on looking in depth and in detail at the *form* of a comic moment—not just what it says, but how it says it. Analyzing comedy can be a good way to become a better observer of the languages, people, and cultures around you.

1. Course Goals

- Be able to describe our major theories of comedy, and to apply them to a range of situations
- Strengthen observational skills through close reading a variety of genres
- Describe the style, tone, and subject of a complicated text, both accurately and expressively
- Practice writing as a process by using various brainstorming, revision, and editing strategies
- Propose and complete an in-depth research paper

2. Prerequisites

HUM 102 and one from among HUM 211, HUM 212 and HIST 213 or their equivalents, all with a grade of C or better. Completion of either the Lit/Hist/Phil/STS or the Open Elective in Humanities and Social Science, with a grade of C or better.

3. There Are No Required Texts, But:

You will be asked to rent or buy Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, and are responsible for 1) reading all material in advance and 2) for having it on your laptop (or for printing it out) in class. If laptops become distracting, I will make printing work mandatory, but would prefer to spare some trees.

4. Assignments

Optional diagnostic essay , due Jan 28 (1-2 pp.)	0%
<i>Writing Center: visit #1</i> complete by Feb. 21	<i>checked off for participation</i>
Initial statement for final paper , due Feb. 18 (4-5 sentences on your possible topic) .	5%
Proposal (and for Honors credit, a bibliography) , due Feb. 28 (500 words/five items)..	15%
<i>Midterm Essay</i> , March 25	15%
Oral, multimedia presentation on the argument of your final paper (5 minutes)	15%
<i>Writing Center: visit #2</i> complete by April 22	<i>checked off for participation</i>
Final paper due on May 10, 11:55 PM (10-12 pages)	25%
<i>Participation (including a collection of your informal writing and, for Honors, extracurricular log)</i>	25%

The **final paper**: see <https://sites.google.com/a/njit.edu/hss-403-comedy/home/files>. It will have several steps: 1) an **initial statement**, a few sentences on what you're going to investigate, 2) a 500-word **proposal**, explaining in more detail what question you're going to pursue; if you're taking the class for Honors, it should have a list of secondary sources that you think may be helpful, 3) a final draft of about ten to twelve pages, or 3500-4000 words. The essay can be on any work covered in

the term, or any other comic work of interest to you (check with me about it early to make sure it seems viable). I am glad to discuss your work in office hours until the end of term.

The final **presentation** will be a five-minute adaptation of your final paper. It should involve some multimedia component (prezi, powerpoint, etc). A grading rubric is up at the Google Site; if your research involves poss. offensive/upsetting material, please talk with CM at least a week before.

The **midterm** essay: approx. 4-page close reading of one scene/element to do with your final paper.

Participation is a large part of this class. It includes: attending, informal writing, showing up on time, speaking up regularly in discussion, and responding to your colleagues' presentations. If you are uncomfortable talking in class, you're welcome to submit short (150-word) responses before the day's class, instead (in addition to any other informal out-of-class writing). Contact me if you want this option. Participation grades will go up on Moodle approximately every three weeks—check there to see how you are doing. Persons who come to class but do not participate verbally or in writing should expect a participation grade around a low C.

For any student taking HSS 403 as an Honors course: Participation also includes a more significant informal written component, the extracurricular log. This log is a record of humor you notice in your day-to-day life—e.g. in advertisements, graffiti, tweets, conversations overheard, emails received, animal behavior, etc. Aim to add a note every day or so, reaching 3000 words over the course of the semester. Describe each instance as vividly as possible, and start to note *why* you found something funny. A good journal will be detailed, imaginative, adventurous and thoughtful; it will cover a variety of genres, not just verbal humor (e.g., you might try to describe what makes an image or a song funny). It might include your own photos or screenshots, or mp3s or gifs; it can use hyperlinks or embed material. An A journal will also be a comic document in its own right. Keep it in whatever form you prefer (google doc, blog, Word doc), but do be ready to include it in your final portfolio. Obviously, please use common sense—don't tell me about run-ins with the law, e.g. (A general rule for all of this course is that if you're handling offensive/obscene material, you need to be all the more rigorous and academic yourself.)

5. Grading

Work will be evaluated according to the university's grading scale. If you are concerned about a grade, **come see me in office hours as soon as possible.** (If it's not too late in the semester, rewrites are possible—I will average out your original grade & the new grade—but essays would need to show more than superficial improvement. If you want to revise an essay, please make at least one appointment with the Writing Center, to discuss revisions, before you submit the rewrite.)

A = 100-90 (superior) B = 86-80 (very good) C = 76-70 (acceptable) F = 59-0 (inadequate)
B+ = 89-87 (excellent) C+ = 79-77 (good) D = 69-60 (minimum)

6. Attendance/Lateness Policies

If you cannot make a section due to illness, an academic commitment, or a major extracurricular event, and if you wish to have the absence excused, ask the Dean of Students (Campus Center, Room 255) to review the request. It lets you deal with all your professors at once.

You may miss up to two classes for any reason without penalty; if you miss a class, contact a classmate to find out what was covered. Every subsequent unexcused absence (that is, an absence w/o a Dean's note) will reduce your participation average by about three points.

According to university policy, students who expect to miss classes because of religious observance must submit to their instructors, by the end of the second week of classes, a written list of dates that will be missed. Similarly, athletes should submit a list of events.

Occasional lateness is completely understandable but frequent lateness will start to bring down your participation grade. Class begins on time, and there will often be brief responses given out and collected in the first five minutes of class; they can't be made up and do count for participation.

7. Submitting Work

Submit your essays as both 1) hard copies at the start of class, and 2) through Moodle. Please include your name, and use reasonable margins & spacing, so that I have room to write comments.

8. Late Work

If you know in advance that you are having trouble completing an assignment, please see me as soon as possible. Extensions are possible, but require 24 hours' notice. Otherwise, the grades of late work will go down by five points per day (e.g., from a 90 to an 85), until the work hits a grade of 65. Please back up your work frequently.

9. Plagiarism

The NJIT honor code defines plagiarism "*as using or attempting to use written, oral, or graphic work which was authored or prepared by another and submitting it as one's own.*" The full text of the University Code can be found at <https://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/academic-integrity-code.pdf>.

If your work uses the idea or language of any other person (in a paper, blog post, presentation, or any other work that's being evaluated, whether from an essay or from YouTube or whatever), make that use clear to your reader by citing clearly and thoroughly. If you borrow somebody's wording, put it in quotation marks (always!). If you borrow an idea or a fact, give them credit. An essay that involves plagiarized portions usually get a zero; it may involve meeting some deans.

In addition: do not use student essays found online as sources, and do not use Shmoop, Sparknotes, Cliff Notes, genius.com, or Wikipedia as sources in papers (Wikipedia can be a great starting place but you need to track down the original source of whatever useful material you find there). Shmoop and similar sites are often dead wrong, boring, or prone to oversimplifying.

10. Special Needs

If you are a student with a documented disability, please see me at the beginning of the semester to discuss accommodations. You can also contact Student Disability Services at (973) 596-3420.

11. The Writing Center

The Writing Center (downstairs in CKB) is available for forty-minute individual and group appointments with writing center staff. The writing center staff can help with planning assignments, improving your writing, refining an essay or multimedia project, or other communication-based needs. See <https://njit.mywconline.com/>.

You're asked to make two visits, one by 2/21 and one by 4/22; please ask the writing tutor (aka writing consultant) to fill out a Writing Center report and send it to me, so that I know you are going

and give you credit. Please bring the handout on the final essay, so the consultant can see how you'll be graded. For the second meeting, you should aim to discuss a full draft of your essay.

12. Cautions...

First: we will encounter potentially crude or upsetting course materials: addiction, racist language, sexual themes, domestic violence, blasphemy, nuclear war, dementia, etc. There will be some foul language, although foul language itself isn't the point. In *Sorry to Bother You*, there will be nudity. We will analyze these materials from an academic, neutral perspective.

Second: with this frequently controversial material, it will be important that you consider your classmates' reactions before introducing potentially offensive material (explaining *why* you're introducing something and why the material is valuable, is important). Respect for one another should be your first consideration. If you are unsure if something might be suitable for class, please contact me outside of class. Be tactful in references to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and politics: keep in mind that a subject you personally find harmless may be painful to a classmate, and handle the subject thoughtfully. Feel free to email me before any class if you have questions. The views of these texts/films are not necessarily those of the instructor.

Your final paper may well examine offensive material, which is completely fine, but if so, be in touch early about how to handle your final presentation. The iffier it is, the more rigorous, neutral, and professional you need to be in your handling of it.

13. Course Schedule

NOTE: **This schedule is not set in stone.** *Texts and short assignments will change*; any email or in-class announcements take precedence over its deadlines.

Jan. 24 (Thurs.): Introduction; preview.

Jan. 28 (Mon.): Due: optional diagnostic essay.

Read: James Thurber, "[The Night the Bed Fell](#)" and "[The Secret Life of Walter Mitty](#)." With "The Night the Bed Fell," come with *one single sentence you found funny and have looked at as closely as possible*.

Be ready to read it aloud and talk about it briefly, in detail.

With "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," find *at least one word or image that occurs multiple times*: why?

Goal: attention to language, to *how* something is said.

Jan. 31 (Thurs.): "[the art of the gag](#)" (8 min) and Buster Keaton, *Sherlock Junior* (40 min). Goal: attention to visual details. Info on final essay.

Feb. 1 Friday: Last Day to Add/Drop a Class

Feb. 4 (Mon.): Chaplin, *Modern Times* (1936) and [Corrigan, A Short Guide to Writing about Film, Ch. 3](#).

Goal: attention to elements of the mise-en-scene.

Feb. 7 (Thurs.): Skim before class: two sample HSS 403 essays. Discussion of final project, and possible topics. In-class writing on five possible ideas.

Feb. 11 (Mon.): Discussion of two of our main comic theories and of the final essay.

Feb. 14 (Thurs.): Boots Riley, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018).

Feb. 18 (Mon.): Aleksandar Hemon, from *The Question of Bruno*: "[Exchange of Pleasant Words](#)" and from "Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls." Due: initial statement.

Commented [MC1]: On dystopia, machines, work, cf. scenes from Terry Gilliam, *Brazil* (1985) "The Ministry of Information" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xNnRBksvOU>) and "Information Retrieval" (<https://youtu.be/LFIFIG22Y9E>).

Feb. 21 (Thurs.): Writing about stand-up: last twenty minutes of Richard Pryor, *Live on the Sunset Strip*.

One appointment with the Writing Center should take place by this date. Bring the tutor the assignment for the final paper (and the grading rubric), and your initial statement (or even a draft of your proposal). Ask the WC to send me a “report,” so I can check you off.

Feb. 25 (Mon.): Stand-up, ii: excerpts from Poundstone, Izzard, Iglesias, Buress, Noah.

Feb. 28 (Thurs.): George Herriman, selections from the 1925 *Krazy Kat* comics. **Assignment: word- and image-collecting mission.** Skim Sylvan Barnet [Chs. 3 and 4 of *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*](#), on analyzing images. Response due via Google Forms, before class, on one Herriman strip and on your chosen words/images.
Due: proposal. No reading assigned.

March 4 (Mon.): Cold War Comedy. Watch, in advance: [Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*](#) (1964).

Telephone comedies: “I told you never to call me here; don’t you know where I am?” and “Hello? Hello, Dimitri? Listen, I can’t hear too well,” from *Strangelove*. Bob Newhart: defusing a bomb; Elaine May and Mike Nichols, operator sketch; Shelley Berman?

March 7 (Thurs.): *Strangelove*, day ii: Decent script is [here](#). Supplemental: Mick Broderick, “[Authentically Strange](#).” Other criticism on this movie. Donald Barthelme, “Game” [short story, www.latexnet.org/~burnt/Game.html].

March 11 (Mon.): Mon., Nov. 26. Comedy and mental health: [Maria Bamford](#), [Aparna Nancharla](#) and [HeadGum interview](#), Lydia Davis, Issa Rae?

March 14 (Thurs.): **Contemporary genres.** Teju Cole, from [small fates](#).

March 17 Sunday Spring Break

March 25 (Mon.): Due: close reading (midterm assignment). Poll about late April viewings/readings.

March 28 (Thurs.): Presentations 1-5

April 1 (Mon.) : Presentations 6-10

April 4 (Thurs.) : Presentations 11-15

April 8 (Mon.) : Presentations 16-20

April 11 (Thurs.) : Presentations 21 - ?

April 15 (Mon.): Due: full draft for peer review.

April 18 (Thurs.): Key and Peele, “[Boarding Order](#)”; Simon Armitage, “[Thank You For Waiting](#).”

April 22 (Mon.): Is modern poetry funny? Terrance Hayes, Ross Gay, David Hernandez, Amit Majmudar, Morgan Parker. A second Writing Center visit should take place by this date.

April 25 (Thurs.): No class.

April 29 (Mon.): *Input welcome.* For extra-credit: “teaching” a recent work to the class.

May 2 (Thurs.): Last day of classes: ?

May 10 (Friday): final essay and all informal writing, due **on Moodle. No need for hard copy.**