

## Reason Gone Mad: Using Humor in University Writing Centers

By Caroline Egan, Penn State University

“Humor is reason gone mad.”  
-Groucho Marx

A friend of mine wears a t-shirt that says, “Sarcasm: just one of my many talents.” This humorous piece of clothing contains an inescapable truth about contemporary student culture: we know how to be sarcastic. This talent for witty comebacks and this keen taste for irony are part of a larger milieu in which the common unit of currency is humor. Consider the role of *Saturday Night Live* in the recent election, or the overwhelming prominence of satirical news sources such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Onion*. Let’s examine the current situation in terms of rhetoric and its roots that extend far beyond the 21st century. Plato’s *Dialogues* are often overwhelmed by the humorous self-entrapment of Socrates’ conversation partners. The useful Aristotelian definition of rhetoric is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Honeycutt I.2). Rhetoric, in both cases, cannot be boiled down to something to be taught as an object, but as a tool. As tutors, we cannot ask “Is there rhetoric in your paper?” Rather, as tutors, we try to find if a student has appropriately employed rhetoric to gain his or her ends. This predicates the existence of “ends,” which is why we are first concerned with the global issues of the thesis statement and audience. However, I often find that I am stopped at rhetoric. How to explain it to a student who has just realized that academic writing often requires an argument rather than an explanation? Rhetoric does not need to be something monolithic and mysterious that appears on rubrics: in University Writing Centers, we can promote rhetoric as the opening up of ways and means, as the amorphous and powerful tool that can be applied to any paper to make it “work.” In our contemporary environment of sarcasm, irony, and satire, definitions of rhetoric are increasingly important and devastatingly less accessible. Rather than leaving rhetoric as a nebulous, unapproachable but vital writing tool, we as tutors could explain rhetoric in one of its most obvious uses: satire and comedy.

Understanding an article from *The Onion* incorporates the fundamental elements of rhetorical analysis. Consider the January 25, 2006 article “More Companies Phasing Out Retirement Option.” This article describes the new plan of major United States companies to replace retirement pensions with “‘indefinite-employment’ plans.” Based in the social reality of dwindling social security and the privatization of retirement plans, the article is written with a rhetoric that exemplifies some key writing strategies: it is predicated on a common cultural understanding, includes a pathological appeal to the situation of the elderly, and describes the steps of an exaggerated syllogism. True, the article lacks a thesis statement. However, the use of humor and sarcasm to structure and support a potent thesis should not be neglected. We can even look to history to see such authors as Petronius, Lawrence Sterne, Jane Austen, and Joaquim María Machado de Assis, all of whom made excellent use of humor to explore the absurdities of life and custom through powerful, lasting texts that substantiated strong, specific, and extended theses.

In university writing centers, we could approach rhetorical understanding through the use of satire. If a student is struggling to pinpoint his or her use of rhetoric, we can return to the fundamental question: “what do you think rhetoric is?” Equipped with an Aristotelian definition (or any explainable definition), why not hold a brief conversation about defining rhetoric as a variable method, and then apply it to something concrete and familiar to the student? Now, not all students will be familiar with *The Onion*. But if we include sources such as *Saturday Night Live*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, or any one publication or show in the multiplicity of those that regularly and pointedly employ the rhetoric of comedy, discussing rhetorical means could be transformed into something enjoyable and relevant, rather than just a vague and daunting word on syllabi.

#### Works Cited

Honeycutt, Lee. *Aristotle's Rhetoric: a hypertextual resource compiled by Lee Honeycutt*. Based on the translation of W. Rhys Roberts.  
<<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/Rhetoric/rhet1-2.html>>.

“More Companies Phasing Out Retirement Option.” *The Onion*. Issue 42.04. January 2006. <<http://www.theonion.com/content/node/44679>>.