

MODEL PROPOSAL FOR ENGL 5339 (DIRECTED STUDY)*

ROBERT UREN

STAND-UP COMEDY: THEORY & TEXT
SUPERVISING FACULTY: DR. ROBERT DONAHOO
FALL 2010

RATIONALE FOR DIRECTED STUDY:

The purpose of this directed study is to create a structured, academic space in which I may pursue a familiarity with and participation in current trends in humor scholarship, with a specific focus on theoretical analyses of stand-up comedy texts. Pragmatically, the course will culminate in my producing an academic writing sample that will demonstrate my ability to function at a high level within the arena of graduate and professional-level critical studies; this demonstration is intended to facilitate my admittance into and success within a PhD program in the field of American Studies, Communications, or English. Less pragmatically, though perhaps more importantly, the course is designed to intensify and formalize my efforts to understand and critique intelligently—to read and respond insightfully to—popular comedic texts, an ambition that informs my scholarly, creative, and personal pursuits.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- Increase understanding of academic literature concerning humor
- Enhance knowledge of literary criticism
- Develop ability to analyze texts theoretically within critical frameworks
- Produce original academic writings that contribute to the burgeoning field of stand-up comedy research

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The proposed directed study joins literary criticism, humor studies, and existing stand-up scholarship for the purposes of analyzing stand-up comedy as *text*. Literary theory and criticism are crucial to the critical evaluation and theorization of any text. Humor studies provide theoretical frameworks invaluable to the analysis of comedy. Recent studies of stand-up comedy utilize both literary criticism and humor scholarship to read stand-up comedy *as text*. The course features not only a comprehensive survey of stand-up comedy scholarship but also introductions to relevant literary criticism and humor studies.

Despite its popularity, stand-up comedy is among the less theorized, less analyzed media that, to some degree, identify, articulate, and assess cultural meaning for popular audiences.

On television, the cable network Comedy Central features stand-up comedy daily, the premium cable channels Showtime and HBO have a long and ongoing history of airing stand-up

* In your proposal, please follow the general format of this model, adapting as necessary to your own topic.

“specials,” and the broadcast networks regularly feature performances. Finally, although we have seen the end of the stand-up “boom” of the eighties and early nineties, comedy clubs across the United States continue to host thousands of hours of stand-up acts each week. A broader conceptualization of what performances qualify as “stand-up” would increase the presence of the form exponentially, as it would comfortably include sketch comedy troupes and their “televisual” and film projects, late night talk show hosts, and even material converted from traditional stand-up acts for situation comedies and films. Stand-up comedy is a cultural phenomenon in need of deep readings and thoughtful discourse. My work for this directed study will be done in the spirit of meeting that need, however partially it is able to accomplish the broader aims.

EVALUATION:

READING RESPONSES ESSAYS (20% COLLECTIVELY)

To organize my experience with the readings, I will present Dr. Donahoo weekly with informal one to three-page arguments in response to that week’s books, articles, and/or chapters. These papers will ensure some degree of comprehension and will, in some cases, grow into more substantial portions of the longer, more formal writings. These will not require formal evaluation beyond assessing their completion.

PRELIMINARY WRITINGS (30% COLLECTIVELY)

I will write two five-page essays in preparation for designing the longer, more rigorous final paper. Each preliminary writing assignment will utilize a theoretical apparatus to read a stand-up performance, performer, or performer’s career.

FINAL PAPER (50%):

The course readings and discussions will ultimately inform a publishable paper of twenty to twenty-five pages. The project will use critical works and original readings of primary texts to defend a clear thesis designed to enhance the existing theorization of stand-up comedy as a cultural artifact of consequence.

SEMESTER GRADING RUBRIC:

Reading Response Papers	20% Collectively
Preliminary Writings.....	30% Collectively
Final Paper	50%

WEEKLY SCHEDULE:

Dr. Donahoo and I will meet weekly to discuss readings and thoughts, according to the following schedule.

WEEK 1 – HISTORY, HUMOR & STAND-UP:

Carrell, Amy. “Historical Views of Humor.” Raskin 303-32.
Zoglin, Richard. *Comedy at the Edge*.
Knoedelseder, William. *I’m Dying Up Here*.
Tafoya, Eddie. Chapters 4 and 5. Tafoya 85-148.

WEEK 2 – PHILOSOPHY:

Morreall, John. “Philosophy and Religion.” Raskin 211-242.
Tafoya, Eddie. “Joke Theories.” Tafoya 71-84.

WEEK 3 – LINGUISTICS:

Attardo, Salvatore. “A Primer for Linguistics of Humor.” Raskin 101-156.
Morreall, John. “Verbal Humor without Switching Scripts.”

WEEKS 4 – RHETORIC & DISCOURSE:

Grabau, Tarez Samra. “Beyond ‘Wit and Persuasion.’” Raskin 399-448.
Wilson, Nathan Andrew. *Was That Supposed To Be Funny?*
Greenbaum, Andrea. “Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument.”
Pearson, Kyra. “Words Should Do the Work of Bombs.”

WEEK 5 – CULTURE & FOLKLORE:

Mintz, Lawrence E. “Humor and Popular Culture.” Raskin 281-302.
---. “Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation.”
Oring, Elliott. “Humor in Anthropology and Folklore.” Raskin 183-210.
---. “Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster.”
Dundes, Alan. Selections from *Cracking Jokes*.

WEEK 6 – THE POSTMODERN:

Preliminary Essay 1 Due

Auslander, Philip. “Comedy about the Failure of Comedy.”
Baudrillard, Jean. From *The Precession of Simulacra*. Leitch 1732-1741.
Jameson, Frederic. “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.”
Lyotard, Jean-Francois. “Defining the Postmodern.” Leitch 1612-1615.
Tafoya, Eddie. “Steven Wright and the Post-modern Picaresque.” Tafoya 167-180.
Wuster, Tracy. “Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-Up Comedy.”

WEEK 7 – PARODY, SATIRE, & IRONY:

Hutcheon, Linda. “The Politics of Parody.” *The Politics of Postmodernism* 93-117.
Gray, Jonathan. “Intertextuality and the Study of Texts.”
Colletta, Lisa. “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony.”
Ritchie, David. “Frame-Shifting in Humor and Irony.”
Shugart, Helene A. “Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy.”

WEEK 8 – SOCIOLOGY:

Kuipers, Giseline. “The Sociology of Humor.” Raskin 361-398.
Shouse, Eric. “Role of Affect in the Performance.”
Rutter, Jason. *Stand-Up as Interaction* 25-50.

WEEK 9 – BLACKNESS:

Preliminary Essay 2 Due

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. “Talking Black.” Leitch 2424-32.
Smith, Barbara. “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” Leitch 2302-15.
hooks, bell. “Postmodern Blackness.” Leitch 2478-84.
Schulman, Norma. “The House that Black Built”

WEEK 10 – GENDER:

Cixous, Helene. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Leitch 2039-2056.
Butler, Judith. From *Gender Trouble*. Leitch 2488-2501.
Haraway, Donna. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” Leitch 2269-2299.
Auslander, Philip. “Brought to You by Fem-rage.”
Hutcheon, Linda. “Postmodernism and Feminism.” *The Politics of Postmodernism* 141-168.

WEEK 11 – PSYCHOLOGY:

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

WEEK 12 – PSYCHOLOGY:

Ruch, Willibald. “Psychology and Humor.” Raskin 17-100.
Lacan, Jacques. “The Mirror Stage.” Leitch 1285-1290.
---. From *The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious*. Leitch 1290-1302.
---. “The Signification of the Phallus.” Leitch 1302-1310.

WEEK 13 – ABJECTION:

Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*.

WEEK 14 – OVER-ORTHODOXY:

Final Essay Due

Keller, Florian. *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS:

- Dundes, Alan. *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1960.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Keller, Florian. *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2005.
- Knoedelseder, William. *I'm Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-up Comedy's Golden Era*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2009
- Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: WW Norton, 2001.
- Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Raskin, Victor, ed. *The Primer of Humor Research*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008.
- Tafoya, Eddie. *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form*. Boca Raton: BrownWalker Press, 2009.
- Zoglin, Richard. *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2008.

DISSERTATION:

- Rutter, Jason. "Stand-Up as Interaction: Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues." Diss. University of Salford, 1997.

THESIS:

- Wilson, Nathan Andrew. "Was That Supposed to be Funny? A Rhetorical Analysis of Politics, Problems and Contradictions in Contemporary Stand-Up Comedy." MA Thesis. U of Iowa, 2008.

ARTICLES AND CHAPTERS:

- Auslander, Philip. "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender." *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*. Ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. 315-336.

- . "‘Comedy About the Failure of Comedy’: Stand-up Comedy and Postmodernism." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ed. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 196-207.
- Colletta, Lisa. "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42.5 (2009): 856-874.
- Gray, Jonathan. "Intertextuality and the Study of Texts." *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 17-40.
- Greenbaum, Andrea. "Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument." *Humor* 12.1 (1999): 33-46.
- Jameson, Frederic. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. 1-54.
- Mintz, Lawrence. "Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation." *American Quarterly* 37.1 (Spring 1985): 71-80.
- Morreall, John. "Verbal Humor without Switching Scripts and without non-Bona Fide Communication." *Humor* 17.4 (2004): 393-4000.
- Oring, Elliott. "Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster." *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 276-286.
- Pearson, Kyra. "‘Words Should Do the Work of Bombs’: Margaret Cho as Symbolic Assassin." *Women and Language* 32.1 (Spring 2009): 36-43.
- Ritchie, David. "Frame-Shifting in Humor and Irony." *Metaphor and Symbol* 20.4 (2005): 275-294.
- Schulman, Norma. "The House that Black Built: Television Stand-Up Comedy as Minor Discourse." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 22.3 (1 Sept. 1994):
- Shouse, Eric. "The Role of Affect in the Performance of Stand-Up Comedy: Theorizing the Mind-Body Connection in Humor Studies." *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association* 36 (Spring 2007): 34-49.
- Shugart, Helene A. "Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy." *Western Journal of Communication* 63.4 (Fall 1999): 433-455.
- Wuster, Tracy. "Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-Up Comedy." *Studies in American Humor* 3 (2006): 23-44.

SELECTED STAND-UP COMEDY PERFORMANCES