

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Castle
or
How To Add Humor To Your Writing

A Dargon Summit whitepaper by Jim Owens

"Humour is like a frog; if you dissect it, it dies." -- Mark Twain

Discussing humor is not funny. The analysis of humor robs it of spontaneity, surprise, artifice, and life. If you want to write humor, however, it can only help you to study what makes humor funny. This whitepaper discusses how to write humor. It contains some examples of humor, but is not intended to be humorous itself. It is intended to be a cold, factual, objective look at what humor is, and how to create it.

Before we can discuss adding humor to our writing, we have to ask the question: What is funny? Please consider this short bit of prose:

It was a place where witches met.
Tonight a fire gleamed on the very crest of the hill. Dark figures moved in the flickering light.
The moon coasted across a lacework of clouds.
Finally, a tall, pointy-hatted figure said, "You mean everyone brought potato salad?"
(Shamelessly excerpted from Witches Abroad, by Terry Pratchett, HarperTorch, 1991, p. 7)

If you found this small bit of writing funny, there are definite reasons why. If you did not, then it is likely that you at least recognize that it was intended to be funny, and that is often as close as a writer can hope to get. Notice that I said that we have to ask the question "what is funny?" I never said that we could actually answer it. Humor is a very individual thing, and is an art, not a science. There are a few principles we can use, however.

This paper will present one method for incorporating humor into your writing. It will not present all methods, nor will it answer (or even ask) the question of WHY you would want to add humor to your writing. I leave that as an exercise for your readers.

Humor lies in changing the direction of a narrative. To do that the writer must violate one of the reader's assumptions (This section abstracted from <http://www.users.totalise.co.uk/~tmd/jokes.htm>). There are three basic ways to violate an assumption:

- 1) Contradict it
- 2) Exaggerate it
- 3) Make it ridiculous

Swat a fly, and you expect it to die. But what if, instead:

- 1) You swat a fly, and it flies away, or
- 2) You swat a fly with a sledgehammer, or
- 3) You swat a fly with a banana.

Each of these three scenarios could, under the right circumstances, be considered funny. Imagine Woody Allen performing the act described in the first point, Arnold Schwarzenegger doing the second, and John Cleese doing the third. Each of those would likely draw at least a smile, if not actually a laugh.

Writing humor, as stated earlier, is an art, not a science, but there are techniques to it. You must set up the punchline properly. If I say that I used a sledgehammer, it's not funny if I don't tell you I'm swatting a fly. For all but the simplest of gags, you as the writer will need to explain who a character is and what they are like for humor to be truly meaningful. For example, consider this sample regarding an apprentice mage:

Lufus stepped into his room and closed the door, sealing the light of the hallway behind him. He

stood a moment in the dark, then decided to practice summoning the fire with his mind like his master had shown him. Straightening his spine, Lufus visualized his half-used tallow candle. He could see it in his mind's eye, in his new, wooden candlestick. He pictured the candlestick on the table where it always sat to provide light for him as he copied from the arcane scrolls of lore. He could feel the candle's oily surface and smell the burnt tang of the wick. He visualized the flame springing up and illuminating the room. He waited. The room remained dark. Lufus tried again: candle, candlestick, wick, flame, light. Nothing. He tried again. Darkness. He tried yet again, and again, and again. The candle remained unlit. Frustrated, he gave up and reached blindly out in the dark. He remembered putting the tinder and flint safely into a porcelain bowl on the back of the table, so as not to wet it with stray drops of ink. His fingers found the rough table edge easily enough, and he began to walk them down the surface. Something light and feathery touched the back of his hand. An image of a large spider flashed into his mind, and he snatched his hand away with a gasp. There followed the unmistakable soft clatter of an entire cup of quills falling over and scattering across the floor. Lufus sighed, and reached out again. His fingers danced lightly across the tabletop, and touched something cold and hard. He tried to grasp it, to feel its shape. It upended with a plug. That would be my ink bottle, he realized ruefully. Unstoppered, as usual. He directed his hand further back on the table. Finally he touched the smooth, curved surface of a glazed, porcelain bowl. Lufus sighed relief and reached inside. He yelped and yanked his hand away after his fingertips sank knuckle deep into the cold, clammy remains of this morning's gruel.

In this passage, there really is no punchline, per se. Instead there is the humor of the situation. It is the character's reaction to events that provides the humor. The description of finding the quills in the cup, the description of finding the ink bottle, these all build the tension. When Lufus sighs with relief, at finding the bowl, we mentally prepare ourselves for more action (the lighting of the candle), since we know the tinder and flint is in a bowl. We assume that the bowl Lufus has just touched is in fact the bowl with the tinder in it! The discovery instead of the gruel violates this assumption, and provides a sudden change in direction. Because it is plausible and conforms to the world the writer has created, it works.

Narrative humor requires that the reader be making assumptions. If the reader is not assuming, for example, that Lufus has touched the bowl with the tinder in it, then his discovery of the gruel will be less funny. When setting up the punchline, appeal as much as possible to the five senses. The more you immerse the reader into the scene, the more assumptions they will be making and the funnier things will seem when you violate those assumptions (assuming the humor is done right). In the paragraph above, Lufus is not just seeing a candle. He is seeing a "half-used tallow candle" in "his new, wooden candlestick", sitting on the table. The reader should also be seeing this. The reader knows that Lufus is looking for a porcelain bowl. When he finds one, the scene is set.

The result of this is that your prose will be seamless, flowing, enveloping. The exception to this is the punchline. Just like an actual punch, it should be short and hard. In a way you will be yanking a laugh out of your readers. The reason for this is that you must not give them a chance to change their assumptions. If, in the paragraph example, Lufus had heard the bowl slosh, had picked it up and felt that it was too heavy for the tinder bowl, and then stuck his fingers in and found the gruel, it wouldn't be funny. The reader would have begun to form new assumptions. Instead we just dump the reader right into the gruel with his fingertips, and the shock of the cold gruel should create the humor. Again, however, the humor wouldn't have worked as well without the element of sense. It's not just gruel, it is "the cold, clammy remains of this morning's gruel."

Another thing about humor is that it must reveal an element of truth. Lies are only funny when they better illuminate the truth, or when they are found out. From the scene above we can see that Lufus is not the neatest of scribes. We see a reference to a spider, a creature known to live in cluttered areas. We see an open cup of loose quills, and his ink bottle is "Unstoppered, as usual." People who are not neat put themselves into situations that embarrass and annoy them. Therefore when he sticks his fingers in the gruel we don't really feel he has been placed into an unreasonable situation. The truth of his untidiness is revealed by the sudden reversal of fortune brought on by the punchline. Therefore you as the writer need to ensure that the essential truth of the character and situation is revealed in the text immediately preceding the punchline, or at least has been so thoroughly embedded in the readers mind that it will be always at the fore.

Like any artist, you must understand your audience, and you must understand the topic. For assumptions

to be violated, and truth to be revealed, the reader must understand the scene and the character and must agree that the elements to be revealed are in fact essential truths. If you swat a fly with a flyswatter, and then a truck in New York city drives through the Lincoln Tunnel, that's not really funny. You changed the direction of the narrative, but it did not relate to the original story – no new truth was revealed. Similarly, if you swat a fly and the Supreme Court rules against Row VS Wade, that may be funny, but only if the reader is concerned about and very conversant with the topic of abortion rights. In the paragraph above, the essential truth is the young mage's untidiness. This is a universal truth, but one often unrecognized by the young. Similarly, the wet, unpleasant sensation of cold gruel will be unknown to someone from a society that has never seen, eaten, or prepared it. If the text had been prepared for those readers, more description would be required.

Finally, if you don't think it's funny, then the audience probably won't think it's funny. Because humor must resonate with the reader, and because each person is unique, writing that draws a belly laugh from one person may not even draw a smile on another. But if the author of the text fails to see the humor in their own writing, the chances of it failing to amuse anyone else are quite high.

Perret always says, " Writing comedy is a seat of the pants thing." And he's right. After a while --
- you "gots to go with your gut."
(From <http://www.writersweekly.com/articles/090402-01.html>)

To sum up, here is a method for adding humor to your writing:

- I. Appeal to the five senses. This will immerse the reader into the story, and activate in their minds the process of anticipation, starting them on the road toward assumptions that we can violate.
- II. Pick out the reasonable assumptions that a reader would be making.
- III. Pull out the essential truth of the characters, places, times, and situations involved.
- IV. Violate one of the reader's assumptions by either:
 - A. Contradicting it
 - B. Exaggerating it
 - C. Making it ridiculous
- V. Tailor the punchline to be short, preventing the reader from changing assumptions before the punchline hits.
- VI. Read it yourself. If it doesn't strike you as funny, try again.

The follow pages contain sample paragraphs that were presented to the Dargon writers at the Annual Summit in April of 2003. They were asked to change the paragraphs in some way so that the paragraphs would then incorporate humor. They are provided as examples of the above described technique. Included in each are the assumptions the re-writers felt a reader would make, and the changed text. I leave it to the reader to decide how successful the attendees were in achieving their goal.

Original Text

The maiden had been trapped on the other side for long as Evelain could remember. It was only by the purest luck that she had found the girl, so random were her appearances. Evelain could never count on the other girl being around and could discover no rhyme or reason to her presence, other than perhaps that she seemed to favor the sun and was often present when it burned its brightest. Cirrangil's maiden, as she had come to call the girl, had first appeared to Evelain when she was young, in the forest behind her father's keep. Loneliness was the price of being different and Evelain had suffered its bite all of her life, that day she had been driven into the shelter of the trees by harsh words whispered under the breath of a chambermaid. Misery had been her only company as she raced into the shelter of the trees. She flung herself upon the ground at the edge of a small pond and wept as the previous sennight of torture replayed over and over in her head. With an insight that was sudden enough to take her breath away, she knew that she could never return to the keep and she rose slowly to her knees. A flash of light caught her eye and ever after, Evelain would believe that the maiden had heard her cries and that she had appeared that day in order to comfort a lonely and dissolute child. The girl was unmistakably beautiful. Her hair flowed around her shoulders like gossamer shimmers of the seamstress' finest silk and her eyes shone with the sun's warmth. Evelain loved her at first sight and she wanted to have Cirrangil's maiden by her side forever, but the maiden remained bound by the other world, trapped on the backside of the water's surface.

Assumption

The reader will assume that "Cirrangil's maiden" is some sort of fairy creature, a mermaid or nymph perhaps, because in the Dargonverse Cirrangil is a spirit or god associated with water.

Changed Text

The maiden had been trapped on the other side for as long as Evelain Castigale could remember. It was only by the purest luck that she had found the girl, so random were her appearances. Evelain could never count on the other girl being around and could discover no rhyme or reason to her presence, other than perhaps that she seemed to favor the sun and was often present when it burned its brightest. Cirrangil's maiden, as she had come to call the girl, had first appeared to Evelain when she was young, in the forest behind her father's keep. Loneliness was the price of being different, and Evelain had suffered its bite all of her life, that day she had been driven into the shelter of the trees by harsh words whispered under the breath of a chambermaid. Misery had been her only company as she raced into the shelter of the trees. She flung herself upon the ground at the edge of a small pond and wept as the previous sennight of torture replayed over and over in her head. With an insight that was sudden enough to take her breath away, she knew that she could never return to the keep and she rose slowly to her knees. A flash of light caught her eye and ever after, Evelain would believe that the maiden had heard her cries and that she had appeared that day in order to comfort a lonely and dissolute child. The girl was unmistakably beautiful. Her hair flowed around her shoulders like gossamer shimmers of the seamstress' finest silk and her eyes shone with the sun's warmth. Evelain loved her at first sight and she wanted to have Cirrangil's maiden by her side forever, but the maiden remained bound by the other world, trapped on the backside of the water's surface. Unable to contain herself, Evelain poured forth her sufferings to the maiden, detailing the torments that her father, aunt, nursemaids, and servants had inflicted upon her. Cirrangil's maiden seemed to listen intently, murmuring unheard words of reassurance as Evelain spoke. When Evelain finished, the maiden simply watched her silently, a look of compassion on her beautiful face. Relieved of her burden, Evelain rose and returned home, ready to face her tormentors again. Behind her, the image of the beautiful maiden walked toward a reflection a reflection of Castigale Keep.

Original Text

Darvale watched as Kael Forester finished his dedication speech. Until now, the people of Northern Hope had laboriously ground their meal by hand in a quern, or used up their dwindling supply of coin to import bread and meal from Dargon. Carron, with the help of many of the townsfolk, had built a new grist mill, and everyone in town had parted with silver to have the millstone ferried upriver from Dargon. Carron's Stream had been dammed, and now there was a substantial pond above the mill. All that remained was for Darvale to remove the barrier and allow water from the mill pond to empty into the sluiceway that would carry it to the mill's huge water wheel. And that would be done just as soon as Kael Forester, the town leader, finished talking about it. Just as Darvale was about to lose patience, the gathering of two score townsfolk turned toward him as Kael announced the opening of the new mill. Darvale straddled the sluiceway, standing above the wooden barrier that kept the mill pond from emptying. Behind him, a dry, five foot deep trench would lead the water to the grist mill; just in front of him, the calm waters of the newly-formed mill pond waited for their chance to escape, past the grist mill and on to join with the larger Coldwell and eventually the sea. Darvale took aim at the pins holding the barrier in place and brought his sledgehammer down in a mighty stroke, shattering the temporary barrier and letting the waters rush past.

Assumption

The reader is assuming that Darvale will swing and hit the pins that hold the water back, an assumption borne out in the last sentence of the above text.

Changed Text

Darvale watched as Kael Forester finished his dedication speech. Until now, the people of Northern Hope had laboriously ground their meal by hand in a quern, or used up their dwindling supply of coin to import bread and meal from Dargon. Carron, with the help of many of the townsfolk, had built a new grist mill, and everyone in town had parted with silver to have the millstone ferried upriver from Dargon. Carron's Stream had been dammed, and now there was a substantial pond above the mill. All that remained was for Darvale to remove the barrier and allow water from the mill pond to empty into the sluiceway that would carry it to the mill's huge water wheel. And that would be done just as soon as Kael Forester, the town leader, finished talking about it. Just as Darvale was about to lose patience, the gathering of two score townsfolk turned toward him as Kael announced the opening of the new mill. Darvale straddled the sluiceway, standing above the wooden barrier that kept the mill pond from emptying. Behind him, a dry, five foot deep trench would lead the water to the grist mill; just in front of him, the calm waters of the newly-formed mill pond waited for their chance to escape, past the grist mill and on to join with the larger Coldwell and eventually the sea. Darvale took aim at the pins holding the barrier in place and brought his sledgehammer down in a mighty stroke, missing the assembly entirely and following the hammer into the pond.

Original Text

Leather-bound books filled three mahogany shelves, amidst various knick-knacks of memory: a crystal sphere; a vial containing the last drops of some precious liquid; the feather of a rare bird. The shelves adorned the walls of a similarly decorated room: a mantelpiece cluttered with wooden carvings; a small table with strings and hooks; and a stack of scrolls in the far corner from the lit fireplace. In the middle of the room, facing the door, stood an oak desk, pristine and neat, entirely devoid of decoration except for a glass of Lederian red wine. Behind the desk sat Aardvard Factotem, a broker of information and dabbler in alchemy.

It was a cold winter day, and his fire was well stoked. The past week's snow, surprisingly early for season, had decimated travel in the streets below, and virtually stopped visitors to his office. Even the Shadow Boys, local ruffians who usually pestered his doorstep and occasionally sold him information, had been scarce about the neighborhood. If that fool weather mage had given him accurate information about the blanket of snow Dargon had received, he thought, he could have used that to his advantage. But now he sat at his desk, no visitors calling, watching the harbor through his fogged window panes. Several boats remained well off shore, awaiting use of the few docks that the Longshoremen had cleared of ice.

Assumptions

1. The desk is appropriately sized for Aardvard.
2. The "Longshoreman" are just average sailors or dockhands.

Changed Text # 1

Leather-bound books filled three mahogany shelves, amidst various knick-knacks of memory: a crystal sphere; a vial containing the last drops of some precious liquid; the feather of a rare bird. The shelves adorned the walls of a similarly decorated room: a mantelpiece cluttered with wooden carvings; a small table with stings and hooks; and a stack of scrolls in the far corner from the lit fireplace. In the middle of the room, facing the door, stood an oak desk, pristine and neat, entirely devoid of decoration except for a glass of Lederian red wine. Behind the desk sat Aardvard Factotem, a broker of information and dabbler in alchemy. The new desk was, Aardvard grumbled to himself, poorly sized. While sitting down, Aardvard could smell, but not reach the wine. So much for warming his innards, Aardvard decided. He was forced to look out the window.

Changed Text # 2

Leather-bound books filled three mahogany shelves, amidst various knick-knacks of memory: a crystal sphere; a vial containing the last drops of some precious liquid; the feather of a rare bird. The shelves adorned the walls of a similarly decorated room: a mantelpiece cluttered with wooden carvings; a small table with strings and hooks; and a stack of scrolls in the far corner from the lit fireplace. In the middle of the room, facing the door, stood an oak desk, pristine and neat, entirely devoid of decoration except for a glass of Lederian red wine. Behind the desk sat Aardvard Factotem, a broker of information and dabbler in alchemy.

It was a cold winter day, and his fire was well stocked. The past week's snow, surprisingly early for the season, had decimated travel in the streets below, and virtually stopped visitors to his office. Even the Shadow Boys, local ruffians who usually pestered his doorstep and occasionally sold him information, had been scarce about the neighborhood. If that fool weather mage had given him accurate information about the blanket of snow Dargon had received, he thought, he could have used that to his advantage. But now he sat at his desk, no visitors calling, watching the harbor through his fogged window panes. Several boats remained well off shore, awaiting use of the few docks that the Longshoremen had cleared of ice. The Longshoremen, a notorious singing group, serenaded as they worked. The off-key voices spread from the harbor to Aardvard's window. Aardvard mused that the sound was likely cracking more ice than the men's picks.

Original Text

"Mama! Mama! Look what I got!" A black-haired little girl came running towards a woman tending to her garden. At the sound of her daughter yelling for her, she looked up and watched as her bare feet whirlwind stumbled, rolled in the grass, jumped up again, and continued her race homeward holding something triumphantly in her hand. Quite a bit further behind she saw another girl, trying to keep up. "Mama, look!" the girl said, breathing heavily. "Hello to you too, Simona," the woman replied. "I see you left Megan behind, again. You know you're to stay together all the way home, not just until you see the house." "Yes, Mama," Simona said and looked at the ground. Remembering the object in her hand, a smile broke on her face. "Jarid made a boat for Megan and me," she grinned holding her treasure up for her mother to see. "Can we go to the creek to let it swim?" "Tomorrow, Simona. You and Megan have chores to do and it's getting late." "Straight. I'll get Megan," Simona said and skipped towards her sister. The woman watched as Simona met up with her sister, took her hand, and walked her home. Even though the girls were twins, they couldn't have been more different. Simona, with her black hair and blue eyes, was lively and energetic. Her skin was tanned from spending most of her time outside, running, jumping, climbing trees, and getting into trouble more often than her mother could appreciate. Megan on the other hand, had red hair and green eyes. She was a bit shorter than her sister, and because she was sick quite often, had a paler complexion. Megan also had a difficult time keeping up with her sister. "Mama, can we go to the creek to let the boat swim Jarid made for us?" Megan asked the moment she reached her mother. Her small arms found their way around her mother's neck and her eyes were begging. "Megan," the woman said with a slight smile on her face, "I already told Simona we can go tomorrow. It's late and you two have chores to do. Besides, I don't want you two by the creek alone." "But Mama," Simona pouted, "we'll be careful ..." "No! And not another word." The next morning the twins were up early and completed their chores quickly. They wolfed down their breakfast despite their mother's reminder to eat slowly. Standing by the door, holding their boat in one hand and her sister's hand in the other, Simona looked at her mother expectantly. "We're ready, Mama!" "I can see that," the woman replied, smiling. She reached for a basket and then opened the door.

Assumptions

1. The boat will float
2. The basket contains food and / or picnic goods

Changed Text

"Mama! Mama! Look what I got!" A black-haired little girl came running towards a woman tending to her garden. At the sound of her daughter yelling for her, she looked up and watched as her bare feet whirlwind stumbled, rolled in the grass, jumped up again, and continued her race homeward holding something triumphantly in her hand. Quite a bit further behind she saw another girl, trying to keep up. "Mama, look!" the girl said,

breathing heavily. "Hello to you too, Simona," the woman replied. "I see you left Megan behind, again. You know you're to stay together all the way home, not just until you see the house." "Yes, Mama," Simona said and looked at the ground. Remembering the object in her hand, a smile broke on her face. "Jarid made a boat for Megan and me," she grinned holding her treasure up for her mother to see. "Can we go to the creek to let it swim?" "Tomorrow, Simona. You and Megan have chores to do and it's getting late." "Straight. I'll get Megan," Simona said and skipped towards her sister. The woman watched as Simona met up with her sister, took her hand, and walked her home. Even though the girls were twins, they couldn't have been more different. Simona, with her black hair and blue eyes, was lively and energetic. Her skin was tanned from spending most of her time outside, running, jumping, climbing trees, and getting into trouble more often than her mother could appreciate. Megan on the other hand, had red hair and green eyes. She was a bit shorter than her sister, and because she was sick quite often, had a paler complexion. Megan also had a difficult time keeping up with her sister. "Mama, can we go to the creek to let the boat swim Jarid made for us?" Megan asked the moment she reached her mother. Her small arms found their way around her mother's neck and her eyes were begging. "Megan," the woman said with a slight smile on her face, "I already told Simona we can go tomorrow. It's late and you two have chores to do. Besides, I don't want you two by the creek alone." "But Mama," Simona pouted, "we'll be careful ..." "No! And not another word." The next morning the twins were up early and completed their chores quickly. They wolfed down their breakfast despite their mother's reminder to eat slowly. Standing by the door, holding their boat in one hand and her sister's hand in the other, Simona looked at her mother expectantly. "We're ready, Mama!" "I can see that," the woman replied, smiling. She reached for a basket and then opened the door.

When the woman and her two daughters got down to the creek, they found a small pool of calm water. The girls removed their sandals so they could wade into the water while their mother chose a nice spot by the edge of the water. She enjoyed the scent of the fresh summer breeze, and the shade cast by the oaks on the riverside. Moss-covered rocks littered the bottom of the stream, slowing the girls' progress into the water. Simona gingerly placed the boat into the water, and they both watched it float slowly away from them. When it was about ten feet from the girls, the mother reached into her basket, removed a pistol, aimed, and blew the boat out of the water.