ACTIVITY 4.5

Finding Truth in Comedy

Learning Targets
- Collaborate to analyze a humorous essay in a Socratic Seminar.
- Write to explain how an author conveys universal truths through humor.

Preview
In this activity, you will read a humorous essay and think about how people use comedy to discuss serious or important topics.

Setting a Purpose for Reading
- As you read the essay, underline words and phrases that are intended to be humorous.
- Circle unknown words and phrases. Try to determine the meaning of the words by using context clues, word parts, or a dictionary.
- Place an exclamation point by text that deals with a universal truth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dave Barry (b. 1947) was a humor columnist for the Miami Herald until 2005. His work there won him the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1988. He has also written novels and children’s books and continues to write articles for a variety of magazines. Much of Barry’s work provides humorous commentary on current social issues.

Essay
I’ve got a few pet peeves
by Dave Barry

Chunk 1
1 Pets are good, because they teach children important lessons about life, the main one being that, sooner or later, life kicks the bucket.

2 With me, it was sooner. When I was a boy, my dad, who worked in New York City, would periodically bring home a turtle in a little plastic tank that had a little plastic island with a little plastic palm tree, as is so often found in natural turtle habitats. I was excited about having a pet, and I’d give the turtle a fun pet name like Scooter. But my excitement was not shared by Scooter, who, despite residing in a tropical paradise, never did anything except mope around.

3 Actually, he didn’t even mope “around”: He moped in one place without moving, or even blinking, for days on end, displaying basically the same vital signs as an ashtray. Eventually I would realize—it wasn’t easy to tell—that Scooter had passed on to that

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS
Focus Standards:
W.8.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
W.8.2a: Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
W.8.2d: Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.
SL.8.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on Grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Additional Standards Addressed:
RI.8.1; RI.8.2; RI.8.4; RI.8.5; RI.8.10; W.8.2c; W.8.2e; W.8.4; W.8.9b; SL.8.1a; SL.8.1b; SL.8.1c; SL.8.6; L.8.5a
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5 SECOND READ: During the second reading, students will be returning to the text to answer the text-dependent comprehension questions. You may choose to have students reread and work on the questions in a variety of ways:

- independently
- in pairs
- in small groups
- together as a class

6 Have students answer the text-dependent questions. If they have difficulty, scaffold the questions by rephrasing them or breaking them down into smaller parts. See the Scaffolding the Text-Dependent Questions boxes for suggestions.

Leveled Differentiated Instruction

In this activity, it may be helpful for students to keep track of humor in the essay by taking notes using the following sentence frames and questions.

Em Provide the following sentence frames to help students write personal responses/commentary: The description of Scooter reminds me of ... This sentences about the beetle named Marvin made me feel ...

Ex Ask the following questions to guide students’ responses. What does this description remind you of? How does the description make you feel?

Br Have students add details to their personal response/commentary by asking the following questions. Which words from the passage are the most important in creating the humor? How do they support the humor in the passage?

Second Read

- Reread the essay to answer these text-dependent questions.
- Write any additional questions you have about the text in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

SCAFFOLDING THE TEXT-DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

1. Craft and Structure (RI.8.4) What is the effect of the repetition of “a little plastic” in paragraph 27? Read paragraph 2. Would the humorous impact be lessened if the author did not repeat “a little plastic” so many times? Why?

2. Key Ideas and Details (RI.8.1) What is the effect of the juxtaposed ideas “grown bigger” and “grown smaller” in paragraph 4? Who do you think is being quoted in paragraph 4? Why are these exclamations humorous? How frequently are the beetles being replaced and why?
ACTIVITY 4.5 continued

7. Have students read and respond to the quote, and discuss their responses.

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Finding Truth in Comedy

1. Craft and Structure: What is the effect of the repetition of “a little plastic” in paragraph 2?
   The repetition makes the turtle habitat seem ridiculous and is juxtaposed to “natural habitats” for ironic effect. RI.8.4

2. Key Ideas and Details: What is the effect of the juxtaposed ideas “grown bigger” and “grown smaller” in paragraph 4?
   The juxtaposed ideas create a comic effect of incongruity, showing in a funny way how often the beetle dies and also how the parents try to protect the child. RI.8.1

3. Craft and Structure: What is the impact of the phrase “little pooping torsos” in paragraph 5?
   “Little pooping torsos” creates comedic imagery and plays on the stereotypical behavior associated with fish. RI.8.4

4. Key Ideas and Details: What specific details does the author include in paragraph 7 in order to have a comic effect?
   Instead of saying “loud music,” he names a specific song that upsets the fish. RI.8.1

Working from the Text

5. Read and respond to the following quote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote by George Bernard Shaw</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Personal Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The power of comedy is to make people laugh, and when they have their mouths open and they least expect it—you slip in the truth.”</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Craft and Structure (RI.8.4) What is the impact of the phrase, “little pooping torsos” in paragraph 5? Read paragraph 5. What activities are fish in general well known for doing? What does the phrase “little pooping torsos” help you visualize relative to the Mongolian Fin Disease? How does the author’s choice of words lighten the tone?

4. Key Ideas and Details (RI.8.1) What specific details does the author include in paragraph 7 in order to have a comic effect? Why does the author choose detailed scenarios to explain how the fish are provoked? Why do you think he chose a specific song, for example? Why is it humorous that the author compares “deadly violence” to the Middle East or junior high?
6. How would you classify this essay (high or low comedy)? Explain.
   High, based on verbal wordplay; less about circumstance than about the way it is conveyed; irreverent (death of pets)

7. How would you describe the humor? What is the author's intended response?
   The author is using high comedy to express a universal theme that all parents can relate to. The author intends readers to respond with "chuckles, grins, and smiles."

8. How does the author use language (diction, syntax, imagery) to create a humorous tone?
   clever wordplay ("same vital signs as an ashtray," "wrangle patio beetles"); pointed remarks; amusing, clever, or witty

9. How does the author appeal to the audience's emotions, interests, values, and/or beliefs?
   Barry seeks to engage the audience in identifying with a common experience of having a pet, and pets dying.

10. What is the universal truth (theme) of the text? How does the author develop the idea through humorous characters and plot?
    Parents will go to great lengths to create good pet experiences for their children. His father was "compelled by powerful instincts that even he did not understand" to buy him another turtle.

11. Develop Levels of Questions based on your analysis to prepare for a Socratic Seminar discussion. Remember to maintain a formal style in your speaking during the Socratic Seminar. Be sure to:
    • Use precise verbs such as communicates, creates, emphasizes, or illustrates when discussing the author's purpose.
    • Use the author's last name: "Barry creates humor by ..."
    • Cite textual evidence to support your opinion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Questioning</th>
<th>&quot;I've got a few pet peeves about sea creatures&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1: Literal</strong></td>
<td>What are the two times Barry mentions zucchini?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 2: Interpretive</strong></td>
<td>What is the significance of zucchini to him? Why can this be classified as high comedy, while &quot;Brothers&quot; may be considered low comedy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 3: Universal (thematic)</strong></td>
<td>Is caring for a pet a good experience for kids?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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11 Discuss the information on maintaining a formal style in Student Step 11. Using a formal style is important to academic discussions and writing. Help students brainstorm more tips and provide examples before commencing the seminar.

12 Before beginning a Socratic Seminar, review the procedure and norms (Unit 2). Set up a fishbowl (inner and outer circles) so that only half of your class is discussing at a time. After 10 minutes, switch the inner and outer circles so that everyone has an opportunity to discuss.

13 Provide students with time to complete the Independent Reading Link activity in class. They will need time to complete the exercise and to discuss themes with their peers.

ASSESS

The seminar serves as an opportunity to generate ideas relating to humor analysis prior to writing. During the discussion, make sure students are able to cite textual evidence to support their analysis, use precise diction to explain the humor, and articulate a theme (universal truth) revealed through the humor.

The writing prompt is another opportunity to practice writing an analysis of a humorous text. Be sure students come to the writing task with a topic sentence about the truth Barry is communicating.

ADAPT

Consider supporting students with a list of possible topics that Barry is commenting upon. Barry’s writing anticipates the parody and satire of the next activity.

12. Brainstorm other precise verbs that will help in your discussion. Do you have any other tips for using formal language?

13. Use your analysis and questions to engage in a Socratic Seminar discussion.

Explanatory Writing Prompt

How does Barry use humor to convey a truth about life? Be sure to:
- Establish a clear controlling idea about conveying a truth.
- Use transitions to create cohesion and clarify relationships among ideas and concepts.
- Use precise diction to describe humorous effects.
- Cite specific evidence from the text.

INDEPENDENT READING LINK

Read and Discuss

For independent practice, choose one of the humorous texts from your list and explain the theme using specific evidence for support. Write several Levels of Questions for a specific section of reading in your Reader/Writer Notebook. Use the Level 3 questions to have a discussion about themes with your peers.