

You're Gonna Learn to Laugh

HOW A BREAK FROM HUMOR AND SATIRE LASTED A WEEK FOR ONE MASTER'S STUDENT

STORY BY [SARAH GARFINKEL, ED.M.'20](#)



14 — **S**o, Miss Sarah, what do you do for fun when you're not with us?" a middle school student asked during lunchtime improv club.

The others mock-gasped. "You have fun without us?"

"Yes, and..." I responded, employing the #1 improv rule, "I like to write humor and satire."

This sparked questions about satire. One student expertly described it as "comedy that is kind of mad about something." I added that satire uses a unique point of view to critique a specific target. This led to a discussion about using comedy to educate in a creative way.

When I signed up for my first comedy writing class, I was in New York City teaching K-8 students about human rights and global citizenship. Teaching these topics was simultaneously exciting and challenging. In an effort to resist future burnout, I decided to try something new and registered for a satire writing class.

While I was initially drawn to satire writing to nurture my creative side, I soon realized satire

is also an effective mode of informal education.

As readers, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the complicated issues in the world and numbly skim through the news. Satire can help counter this tendency. The indirect nature of the satirist's messaging allows readers to infer the subtext without feeling like they are receiving a lecture. Satire is the Phillips head screwdriver of the writer's toolbox: It's manageable, effective, and — unlike other tools — doesn't need to hammer the message home.

Humor has its own magic — it's entertaining and can make topics more digestible. In educational contexts, humor also engages students. My programs worked best when I incorporated humor to meet educational objectives. For example, in the improv club, students learned the fundamentals of youth organizing through entertaining games.

Despite seeing how humor and satire can enrich learning, I didn't anticipate humor and satire fitting into *my* academic coursework. When I came to the

Ed School to study language and literacy, I had resolved to take the year off from humor and satire.

My resolution, however, lasted all of one week.

I quickly learned that there were even more ways to study the overlap between humor and education than I had previously considered. My experiences at the Ed School showed me that the two can complement each other, not just practically but also academically. The first assigned reading for my fall course, "From Language to Literacy," described children's spoken language competence. We read about the development of children's understanding of communicative devices, including irony, metaphor, sarcasm, and humor. My professor introduced me to a visiting scholar who invited me to work on a research project exploring Polish-speaking children's comprehension of verbal irony.

In the fall of 2019, I also participated in a semester-long political media workshop at Harvard Kennedy School. After evaluating various forms of

existing political media, we created a prototype for what we envisioned to be a better political news site. Situating satire within the political media landscape reminded me of its potential. Just as humor can engage and educate children, social and political satire can engage adults and challenge their thinking.

What started as a resolution to take a comedy break turned into the best year exploring the intersections of satire, humor, and education within class, research, and practical settings. I remembered my student's question, "What do you do for fun when you're not with us?" and decided to start the HGSE Writers Room as a space to write creatively and build a community of writer-educators. Although nothing could ever be quite as fun as the lunchtime improv club, the writers room was a close second.



SARAH GARFINKEL HAS WRITTEN FOR *THE NEW YORKER* AND *THE WEEKLY HUMORIST*. HER WEBSITE: [SARAHGARFINKELWRITING.COM](#)