

Moravian College

SOC 370 – Seminar: Sociology of Humor aka How Comics Explain the World

**Dr. Joel Nathan Rosen, Associate Professor of
Sociology
PPHAC 311**

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**Office Hours: T & Th 3:45 – 4:30p, W 1 – 2:30p,
or by Appointment**

****Please check email frequently**¹**

Course Description:

This course will examine the links between humor and the world comics try to explain. Throughout, we will explore ways in which comedians and their thoughts challenge a range of problematic subjects including race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, and politics, broadly conceived. Moreover, we will pay particular attention to a contemporary shift that seems to place uncovering offensive commentary above the more traditional challenge to taboo subjects that has long been at the root of the comedic process while interrogating the question: what is humor's role in an ever-evolving human-centered environment?

Required Text:

- Readings to be announced and posted throughout the term.

Course Objectives:

- To introduce humor from a decidedly academic perspective

¹ And please email using proper grammar and etiquette. I am particularly aggrieved by such things.

² Watch out for additions to this list throughout the term.

³ Work not properly cited will not be graded and could be brought to the Academic Standards Committee under a charge of plagiarism. If you have questions, please seek me out. Also, *Wikipedia* and other types

- To provide discussion of the role of comedy as a vehicle for understanding older and contemporary social orders
- To breakdown the contradictions, ironies, and inconsistencies inherent to a comedic perspective
- To articulate orally and in writing concepts relative to humor alongside issues of perspective, the conceptual meaning of the term ‘offensiveness,’ and the nature of free exchange

Course Requirements:

Students will be required to take write a number of papers of various lengths and types, negotiate an extended research project consisting of several components and steps, prepare presentations in both individual as well as group settings (and each with an individual writing component), and perform other tasks including taking quizzes, impromptu in-class exercises, as well as experiencing a range of cultural and enrichment-type activities all geared toward demystifying the collegiate environment. Fair warning will precede any due date, though quizzes are generally unannounced prior.

The breakdown of final grades is as follows:

Misc. Work, including Quizzes, Participation, etc.	25%
Misc. (Non-Term Type) Papers	25%
Various Oral Presentations (scaled as 1-5)	25%
Term Project	25%

As I typically employ letter grades on written assignments, I offer the below list of how each letter translates numerically:

- A+=100/A= 96/A-=93
- B+=89/B=86/B-=83
- C+=79/C=76/C-=73
- D+=69/D=66/D-=63
- F=55-50 [actual score depends on the severity of the error(s)/student will be notified]
- Failure to turn in work translates into a *ZERO*

Final Grade Scale:

- A=100-95/A-=94-90
- B+=89-88/B=87-84/B-=83-80
- C+=79-78/C=77-74/C-=73-70
- D+=69-68/D=67-64/D-=63-60
- F=59...

Grade Advisory – While I respect that students have to be grade conscious, it is imperative that students understand that:

I treat evaluations as professional—not personal!

Do not ask from me anything that steps outside the boundaries of proper decorum, and do not wait until the 11th hour to inquire as to your status. It is your responsibility to keep abreast of your own grade calculations, and unless the circumstances are unique, I'll leave you to your own devices on that matter. Also, to save us all needless heartache, and in the interest of propriety and our collective mental health, I also have to insist on a twenty-four hour grace period before I will speak to you about any returned work. You may find that this cooling off period is exactly what we both need to come together rationally and in the spirit of liberal learning.

Finally, you are required to attend at least one office hour session during the semester, and it is mandatory that you appear during office hours to discuss/go over in much greater detail any assignment graded below a C-.

Classroom Decorum and Expectations:

Attendance – Class attendance is mandatory and vitally important to your success. Failure to attend on a regular basis not only puts your grade in jeopardy but may also be met with a lowered mark for participation.

- There are no excused absences. If you have a legitimate emergency, it is your responsibility to bring it to my attention at your first possible opportunity.

Tardiness – Tardiness to class is not only detrimental to the learning process but quite disruptive and unfair to those who make it to class on time regularly. Recurring tardiness shows a lack of respect for the classroom, the instructor, and one's fellow students and will not be tolerated. Therefore, once the door has been shut, you will not be permitted to enter.

Deadlines – Assignment deadlines are exactly that. Students are expected to comply with deadlines in accordance with all rules, guidelines, and expectations of each assignment proffered. Failure to do so will result in a tendering of no-grade for work not done to expectation or submitted on time. The policy for late papers is as follows:

- On minor assignments, you will be allowed to turn in one late assignment as long as it is within twenty-four hours for a one letter deduction. After your one exception, you will no longer enjoy this luxury
- Do not expect me to have to chase you down in order to turn in assignments!

Participation – Classroom discussions are a big part of the learning process. Your

participation is not requested—it is required. Failure to do so is both in bad taste and could conceivably be detrimental to your ability to learn effectively.

Disruptions – Disruptive behavior, including talking, unengaged behavior, i.e. reading a book, magazine, or newspaper, sleeping, chronic tardiness alongside loud entrances, and any other unfortunate breach will not be tolerated. **This is especially true with cell phone use and the use of other electronic devices during instruction time.** Learning is an active process, and failure to actively engage not only threatens the individual’s ability to learn but also affects others.

Academic Honesty – You are all responsible for knowing and adhering to the code of academic honesty here at Moravian College. For those of you unfamiliar with this code, it can be found on pages fifty-two through fifty-seven in your student handbook.

Please Note: It is your responsibility to see to it that these expectations and guidelines are met satisfactorily and consistently. I take the classroom quite seriously, and I expect all of you to do the same as well.

Out of Class Submission Requirements (non-negotiable and subject to major negative impact):²

- a title page with a suitable title, your name, the course, section, and my name all spelled correctly
- 12 font (Times New Roman in black) with default margins and double-spaced
- page numbers
- a *References* section (if necessary) at the end of the work done in the most recent citation form of your choice (depends on your major and other factors)³
- for every unedited internet site there must be at least **two** published sources
- with few exceptions, single & two-digit numbers (zero *through* ninety-nine) are to be spelled out; three digits are to be written numerically
- be wary of overuse of abbreviations and/or contractions
- All writing assignments require the use of Oxford commas.
- Please limit (or omit altogether) the use of the passive voice, and under no conditions are you permitted to end clauses/sentences in prepositions.
- a staple in the upper left-hand corner (no frilly covers)

****Please Note that any in-class work must be done in blue or black ink****

Notes on Writing and Research:

As this instructor is particularly driven by written expression, you should expect

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³ Work not properly cited will not be graded and could be brought to the Academic Standards Committee under a charge of plagiarism. If you have questions, please seek me out. Also, *Wikipedia* and other types of non-academic encyclopedias will under no circumstances be considered legitimate sources!

that there will be an emphasis placed on written expression in this course. I should also like you to know from the start that I spend a great deal of time poring over your writing and expect that you will read and explore my commentary on all things ranging from content to grammar, punctuation, and syntax. Please try to check your ego at the doors and realize that this is a learning experience while convincing yourself that blips and missteps are all part of the process.

You should also note that where applicable, this instructor expects his students to deal directly with all matters relating to the citation process. Failure to do so will be dealt with harshly with penalties ranging from a zero on work not properly documented to a formal report to the proper academic disciplinary committee.

A Note on Academic and Disability Support:

Moravian College encourages persons with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation or have questions about the physical access provided, please contact the event sponsor at least one week prior to the event. Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Academic and Disability Support at 610/861-1401 (office located on the first floor of Monocacy Hall). Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the Academic & Disability Support Office.

The Academic Support Center also houses Greyhound Tutoring, which provides course-specific tutors to Moravian students, free of charge. If you would like to work with a Greyhound Tutor to boost your academic success, please request a tutor through <http://bit.ly/NeedTutorMC> (case-sensitive). Plan ahead as it takes 2-3 business days to connect you with a tutor.

Please contact Dana Wilson (wilsond@moravian.edu), Tutor Coordinator, for more information about tutoring or Laurie Roth (rothl@moravian.edu), Director of Academic and Disability Support, for more information about disability support.



“Bert Williams was the **funniest man** I ever saw – and the **saddest man** I ever knew.”
-W.C. Fields

Course Schedule (subject to change)

The following themes and topics will make up the bulk of our term:

- What the bloody @\$%^&*# can comedy teach anyone?!
- The history of humor from the antiquities to the present
- Humor, slapstick, stand-up, and the art of storytelling
- Linguistic turns – the pun in all its glory (also hyperbole, oxymorons, & self-deprecation)
- Irony v Contradiction: An On-Going Debate
- Game Changers from Bert Williams to Phyllis Diller to Chris Rock (list to generate throughout the term)
- Reading history sideways (*aka* how best to ‘get’ the joke)
- Obscenity or Pushing the Envelope: Lenny Bruce and His Descendants Revisited
- Laughin’ just to keep from cryin’
- Clever in other mediums

We will explore these notions through the following activities:

- Script Writing
- Roundtable Discussions

- Improv
- Op/Eds
- Critical Analysis
- Group Presentation
- The Research Sequence

Audio clips to come from private collections and youtube
Video footage to include:

Documentary Topics:

- Late Night Talk Shows
- Vaudeville
- The (Norman) Lear Moment
- The Variety Show

Motion Pictures:

- *My Favorite Year* (1982)
- *The Kings of Comedy* (2000)

Clips & Short Features from:

- The Three Stooges
- The Marx Brothers
- *Richard Pryor Live*
- *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*
- *Back to School* (1989)
- *Skin Deep* (1986)
- *Benny & Joon* (1993)
- *South Park* (2015)