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Tutors' Column: "Playfulness in Discipline: How Punning Witticism is Transforming Criticism in the Writing Center"

Amelia Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York

As technology use in classrooms increases, writing center tutors are assisting students with a greater variety of assignments than ever before. In addition to the traditional term paper, tutors now help students construct arguments for blog posts, online discussion boards, and even the occasional Facebook comment. Brevity is the order of the day in these venues, as students must often communicate their ideas in as little as 150 words. This characteristic of online academic discourse reinforces a more general expectation of academic writing: namely, that one should express complex arguments as concisely and directly as the subject matter will allow. Many students find it difficult to write within these parameters and also maintain an authorial voice. In some cases, a thesis that turns on a well-wrought pun can be an effective rhetorical strategy, as puns convey complex ideas in exactly the economical fashion that academic discourse necessitates. Puns provide a useful tool when constructing scholarly arguments; they allow students to formulate ideas that are both lively and lasting, as puns tend to stick in readers' minds long after they have put an author's words out of sight.

Puns are typically thought to be antithetical to serious scholarly writing, but their potential usefulness, in combination with the evolving genres of academic discourse, brought me to this question: Is there room for a writer's words to be playful within a discipline, while still maintaining scholarly dignity? In what follows, I examine how tutors can help students determine what constitutes "good pun usage" and explain some specific methods peer tutors can use to assist students in constructing punning critiques. More broadly, teaching students how to strategically use puns renders them well equipped to convey their ideas in a world increasingly based on technological communication.

Now, one may pause here to ask: why should students use puns in papers? What are the benefits? My answer is that student writers, while concerned with maintaining the integrity of their academic writing, nevertheless wish to construct arguments that are intellectually provocative—and a skillfully crafted pun gives them a means to do just that. A pun enables writers to condense their ideas into an easily explainable shorthand, useful for many types of discourse. Psychologist Paul E. McGhee's *Handbook of Humor Research* describes the well-wrought pun as one that offers "a simultaneous awareness of two meanings," while linguistics scholar Salvatore Attardo claims, in *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, that the best puns elicit a thought-provoking connection between the two concepts being punned upon (31; 150). From these definitions, we learn that a "good" pun allows a student writer to communicate a complicated, multifaceted argument in a memorable, comprehensive form. Packaging ideas in this pithy-yet-portable way allows writers to leave a lasting impression in the minds of their readers. Given their ability to convey complex arguments economically, puns are especially valuable rhetorical tools within online discourse, and are also useful in more traditional scholarly venues, such as papers—that is, when used with great discretion at appropriate times.

Evaluating a pun's appropriateness and ascertaining audience expectations go hand-in-hand, and tutors must tread cautiously when discussing pun use in academic writing. Puns, while highly useful, are also highly risky, as not all instructors will respond positively to their use. Moreover, an instructor's expectations may change depending on the assignment—that same thesis built upon a praise-worthy pun in a class blog post may be problematic when included in a formal term paper. For these reasons, I have found that pun-oriented sessions are not appropriate or helpful for novice writers who visit writing centers, as they typically lack the audience awareness to gauge whether or not their instructor will be receptive to humor. However, pun-oriented sessions can be highly beneficial for experienced student writers who have a more finely honed audience awareness and are seeking advanced rhetorical strategies with which to build their arguments. I have worked with several such students who, having carefully considered audience expectations, decided that their instructors would respond positively to a pun-based argument. In the following two case studies, I use my tutoring experience with two advanced writers to describe how pun-oriented sessions operate on a practical level.

Pun-based critiques can be a highly effective rhetorical strategy when used appropriately, and writing center tutors can help students adopt such a style. After a student and I have considered the instructor's expectations and decided that puns are a suitable tool for the assignment at hand, I then define for my students what "good pun usage" entails. To do so, I point students towards McGhee's aforementioned definition of a well-wrought pun as one which relates "a simultaneous awareness of two meanings" (31). I then guide students through the process of coming up with puns and evaluating their usefulness based on McGhee's definition. For example, I once worked with a student whose blog post related the emotional frustration one feels while reading Moby Dick to the theme of hunting for something unattainable. That helped the student structure her commentary around "wailing/whaling"—in both the reader's literal and Melville's literary contexts. The student used a single pun, "wailing," to build an argument based upon a "simultaneous awareness of two meanings." Given the class and nature of the assignment, this "wailing" argument is an example of a good pun, used appropriately.

Another example of a successful pun-oriented session occurred with a student writing a biology paper about the relationship between a pregnant woman's activities and their effects upon the child's health. Within the essay prompt, the professor asked students to "write something interesting" that "doesn't sound like a traditional lab report." On the basis of this prompt, the student decided that puns would provide the extra element of interest her professor wanted. When I help students such as this one, I tell them to think of common sayings related to the topic at hand. Together, the student and I came up with a list of common phrases pertaining to the themes of healthcare and social advancement. Once we had made a list, I guided the student through evaluating the quality of each saying, and showed her that phrases which invoked McGhee's "simultaneous awareness of two meanings"—in this case, words which dealt with her paper's two themes at once—would be the most useful for her argument. During this process, although my student discarded a cliché about "putting money where the mouth is," she did locate two phrases which enhanced her thesis. Ultimately, her essay transformed into an analysis relating how mothers' prenatal decisions give their children both a "leg up" in the world, and a way to "get ahead" in life. Her paper argued that pregnant

mothers who conscientiously adopted measures to enhance their unborn children's health stimulated the life-long success of their offspring, as children exposed to such measures developed physically (a "leg up") and intellectually (get "ahead") more rapidly than their peers.

These two case studies exemplify how puns can be useful in academic writing, whether in online venues or in traditional papers. In both examples, advanced student writers, having evaluated their instructors' expectations, decided to build arguments that turned on carefully constructed puns. From these students' experiences we see that, when used cautiously and saved for just the right audience and assignment, puns can be an insight-providing addition to a written argument. As of late, there are many concerns as to whether or not a university education truly prepares undergraduates for tasks they will face in the "real world." Given that humorous news coverage abounds and that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs often necessitate students write short, snappy commentary if they wish to be heard, I believe that teaching punning to undergraduates can equip them to write and argue in the "real world" of online communication, a place which increasingly operates using comedic cultural currency. Teaching students how to formulate their ideas as memorable puns enables them to communicate effectively in a world that values sound bites that are provocative, pointed, and precise.

And now, to bring this discussion about the benefits of punning full circle: Is there a time and a place for playful prose within academic writing? In short, my answer is yes. Well-crafted witticisms can indeed contain well-built criticisms—and arguments formulated in this way have a portable potential to remain relevant and extend beyond university walls. The ways in which students, especially Millennials, communicate and construct critiques are changing. Writing center tutors, as negotiating comic agents, are perhaps able to "humor" these changes best of all.

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Attardo, Salvatore. *Linguistic Theories of Humor.* New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994. Print.

McGhee, Paul E. "The Role of Arousal and Hemispheric Lateralization in Humor." *Handbook of Humor Research: Volume I: Basic Issues.* Ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983. 13-38. Print.