

**Course ID and Title:**

PSYC-412, Current Topics In Social Psychology: The Psychology of Humor

Units: 4

Term—Day—Time: Fall, 2025; Mondays and Wednesdays 2pm - 3:50pm

Location: VHE-210

Instructor: Drew Gorenz

Office: <https://usc.zoom.us/my/gorenz>

Office Hours: Office hours by appointment

Contact Info: gorenz@usc.edu

Recommended Preparation:

PSYC 274 and PSYC 314 coursework are recommended, but not mandatory. I am happy to waive the requirements for students with a strong interest in the course ([Prerequisite Waiver Form](#)).

Course Description

Extensive examination of current research on the psychology of humor, based on original research papers and popular science articles.

Course Summary

Humor is an important part of everyday life. A good sense of humor predicts greater success in friendship creation and maintenance, romance, career success, negotiation, leadership, and more. The course begins by exploring how scientists measure and operationally define humor appreciation and production. Students will learn different psychological theories of humor and how to apply them to understand and create comedy. Throughout the course, students will learn to apply psychological research to better predict how subtle characteristics of a joke's 1) content, 2) delivery, or 3) presentation setting can make it more or less funny for an audience. We will discuss what personality and contextual variables are associated with greater creativity and the production of humor. We will explore recent findings on humor and AI (e.g., DALL-E, ChatGPT, etc) and how to better utilize AI programs to create comedy. We'll end the course by exploring different applications of humor in marketing, persuasion, politics, leadership, the workplace, relationships, and health.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. **Understand** psychological approaches to analyzing humor and **discuss** the core theories of humor
2. **Learn** how psychologists study humor, **appraise** the merits and weaknesses of what methods or stimuli they use, and **critique** the conclusions drawn from studies
3. **Recognize** and **explain** what factors (contextual, perceiver, stimulus, presentation) make a joke more (vs. less) funny
4. **Create** jokes and **critique** what elements make or break examples of recent comedy (e.g., popular memes, sketches from *Key and Peele*, *I Think You Should Leave*, and *SNL*, and standup comedy jokes) using learnings from psychology research
5. **Discuss** the significance of humor in different domains from work to social life to health

Course Notes

Students will be given a letter grade. Classes will be held in person. Class attendance is expected. Participation in in-class discussion and exercises is crucial for performing well in this class.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Required readings will be posted online on Brightspace ahead of class deadlines. Please download the required readings from Brightspace. No materials will need to be purchased.

Description and Assessment of Assignments / Grading Breakdown

15% Participation

- Each class is worth 1 point to be earned through a) arriving to class on time and b) actively participating in class discussion.
 - Students will lose 1/2 point if they arrive late.

10% Pre-class discussion posts

- To prepare for each lesson, students will sometimes be asked to contribute to pre-class reflection assignments. These assignments are **due by midnight the day before their assigned class**. Late submissions will earn a max grade of 80% and will not be accepted after 1pm the following day. We will build off of students' reflections in class discussion.

10% End of class comprehension checks

- Students' comprehension of the assigned core reading of the day and lecture content will be assessed periodically through short end-of-class quizzes.

30% Paper presentations

- To foster students' science reading and communication skills, students will be required to give two short presentations. Each presentation will be on one empirical paper (choose from the "supplemental readings" list for each class). If a student decides to give a 3rd presentation, their lowest presentation grade will be dropped

10% Group project presentation

- Students will be asked to show their understanding of core humor theories by learning about an assigned alternative theory of humor and presenting on it as a group. Groups

will discuss which aspects of their assigned theory provide unique value and which aspects are redundant with other theories

25% Final project - Deadline: May 7th - 3pm

- Two options. Pick one:
 - A) Create comedic TikTok & write a mini-essay about your creation
 - Students will create a comedic TikTok/IG reel (or other short form video) or standup comedy jokes.
 - Then write a short essay explaining what the joke is. What elements make it work? What elements would make it better? Worse? And why?
 - Students should use class learnings to produce & edit their own jokes and explain them.
 - OR B) Write a humor research proposal
 - Find a gap in the current humor literature. Propose the research question and what you would do to study it (IV's, DV's, etc) (No strict page limit, but it should take ~4 - 8 pages to describe what research gap you hope to fill, how, and the limitations of your design).

Extra credit opportunities:

- 1.5 - 2.5% - Write and present your own standup comedy jokes, comedic sketch script, satirical news jokes, or memes to the class. The class will consider what we have learned this semester and give feedback applying those learnings
- 1 - 2% - Revise your jokes with audience feedback, and present your modified set/script for class feedback once again
- 1% - Win a comedy competition in class

Participation

Regular weekly attendance is the only way to get the most out of the class and get high points for participation. **Two unexcused absences are allowed per student (no explanation needed)**. Missing more than two classes will lower your participation grade unless you have injuries, conditions, approved Travel Request Letters, or advance notice of religious observation that might prevent you from participating fully in the class. Always check in ahead of time with the instructor. Arriving at the start of class ready to work is part of your participation grade. If you are to be absent, e-mail the instructor to verify the reason. No cell phone use in class unless instructed.

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
93-100	90-92	87-89	83-86	80-82	77-79	73-76	70-72	67-69	63-66	60-62	<60

Final percentage scores will be rounded up/down to the nearest whole number from .50 and letter grades will be assigned according to the table below.

Assignment Submission Policy

Assignments must be finished and submitted before the start of the class session they are due.

Grading Timeline

Students can expect grades and feedback for assignments within two weeks of their submission or sooner.

Course Specific Policies

Late policy for Assignments

Any assignment received after the deadline will earn a max grade of 80%. Pre-class discussion posts must be submitted by 1pm the day after they are due to earn any credit. No other assignments will be accepted if submitted a week after their deadline. Extension requests may be submitted but acceptance is subject to circumstances.

Course Schedule

[Note: Readings and assignments will be posted on Brightspace. Schedule is subject to change]

Monday 8/25 - Introduction

We will explore why studying humor matters and key terminology and methods. What is the difference between “comedy” and “humor”? How do people express humor appreciation? How do scientists measure it? What are the pros and cons of different methods?

Wednesday 8/27 - How to read research

Because we will read and discuss many research papers over the semester that empirically explore the psychology of humor, we will take today to review how to properly read a research paper and critique it. We will discuss how subtle characteristics of a study’s participants, questionnaire materials, experimental design, or context can drastically shape the results of a study and limit the conclusions one can draw from it.

Monday 9/1 - Labor Day

Wednesday 9/3 - Incongruity theory of humor

What element does every joke have in common? How can we train ourselves to identify it across many different types of jokes?

Monday 9/8 - Conformity, Obedience, and Gricean norms of cooperation and how they relate to humor

Much of comedy involves breaking the norms of society. In this session, we will discuss the norms of conversation most people abide by whether they consciously realize it or not. By learning how to explicitly identify the subconscious norms of society, we can learn how to better identify what elements in comedy are subverting them.

Wednesday 9/10 - Benign violation theory

A variant of incongruity theory is benign violation theory. BVT hypothesizes that humor is the result of norm violations being appraised as benign. We will learn to identify more subconscious norms in society so we can better identify what elements in comedy are driving incongruity. We will also discuss what factors make an offensive joke seem benign. We will explore important social psychological concepts as they relate to humor appreciation such as psychological distance, social norms, power, and social dominance orientation.

Monday 9/15 - Benign appraisal in humor

We will continue our discussion of benign violation theory by examining a greater list of variables at the context-level (i.e., audience mood, physical place) and perceiver-level (e.g., gender, race, age, sexism, etc) that influence one's benign appraisal of a norm violation, and thus their humor appreciation.

Wednesday 9/17 - Judgments of truth and coherence

Jokes involve incongruity or surprise. Incongruity, by definition, creates incoherence. Does a joke need to *feel* coherent in order to be funny? How do we reconcile a joke's need for surprise with its need for coherence? We begin to explore what factors affect one's judgment of truth and coherence.

Monday 9/22 - How do we use our feelings of ease (or difficulty) to make judgments of truth, beauty, and humor?

People tend to use their feelings as information to guide their judgments of truth, coherence, and beauty. We explore why. We will discuss what rhyme, alliteration, repetition, sound quality, print font accessibility, and portrait mode have in common. Lastly, we will organize what connects our judgments of truth, beauty, and humor through theory and empirical data.

Wednesday 9/24 - Fluency and humor

We continue this week's theme by further exploring how we use our judgments of easy (or difficult) processing to facilitate our humor appreciation of jokes, and how to apply these learnings. We will review popular comedic techniques and tropes that seem to benefit from encouraging easier processing through repetition of content and structure, analogy, and more.

Monday - 9/29 - Laugh tracks in comedy

Laugh tracks have been a big part of comedy, historically. What is the significance of them? Do they work? If so, when? Why?

We will allot some time for group work on group presentations (for 10/22) at the end of class.

Wednesday 10/1 - Authenticity and humor

On the one hand, people often evaluate things more positively when they are authentic (Bullot & Reber, 2013; Newman & Bloom, 2012). On the other hand, people may understand that a lot of comedy builds on false premises. Comedians often make things up or exaggerate details to

create humor. Many jokes are written by teams of writers, not just the person performing them. Does authenticity matter in comedy? If so, when?

We will allot some time for group work on group presentations (for 10/22) at the end of class.

Monday 10/6 - Creativity

Comedy is as much an art as other forms. How does one create a novel joke? How do psychologists define and measure creativity? What factors facilitate creativity across many domains? What is the difference between convergent and divergent creativity? And how do they factor into the process of producing humor?

We will allot some time for group work on group presentations (for 10/22) at the end of class.

Wednesday 10/8 - Humor production

How do researchers measure how funny a person is? What are the strengths and weaknesses to different methods? We will explore these questions with respect to different elements of a joke such as its writing and its delivery. We will also explore professional comedians' advice on writing jokes.

Monday 10/13 - Individual differences and humor styles

How do individual differences (e.g., personality, gender, age, political orientation, need for humor, etc) predict differences in humor appreciation and production? Not all humor leads to positive outcomes. Some humor can be defined as disparaging to the self or others. We will learn about how proclivities toward producing or appreciating some kinds of humor can predict more positive or negative outcomes.

Wednesday 10/15 - Effects of comedy on thinking and feeling

After exploring what makes things funny, we now look at how comedy affects our thinking. How does reading a joke affect your subsequent thinking? How does re-appraising an aversive stimulus as humorous affect our subjective well-being?

Monday 10/20 - Affective forecasting

How good are people at predicting their future emotions (including those associated with humor appreciation)? What do they struggle with? How good are people at assessing their own skills? What are the unique difficulties in predicting whether a joke will be funny for another person or assessing how funny one's own jokes are?

Wednesday 10/22 - Group Presentations - Debate alternative theories of humor

Students will present group presentations on their assigned alternative theory of humor. Students must define their theory, explain what context it arose out of, what types of jokes or humor it accounts for, what types of jokes it doesn't explain, what aspects are redundant with the theories we have already learned, and apply the theory by creating a new joke aligned with its thinking.

Monday 10/27 - Humor and AI

Can AI models predict how funny a joke is? Can they produce quality jokes themselves? How can people utilize recent progress in AI development to their advantage? What prompt-engineering strategies can be used to get LLMs to create better jokes? We will have a competition to see who can get an LLM to produce the best jokes.

Wednesday 10/29 - Developmental Psychology of Humor

At what age, does laughter occur? How do peoples' senses of humor change over their lifespans? Do people prefer different types of humor as they grow older?

Monday 11/3 - How comedy has changed over time and modern issues

How has comedy changed over time? What is unique about people's sense of humor in the 2020s? Is comedy more inhibited or less than it was 60 years ago? What factors predict whether a joke ages well over time? We will also discuss modern issues in humor like cancel culture and research on how scandal affects people's appreciation of art.

Wednesday 11/5 - Relationships

What factors predict the success of our relationships? To what extent do people seek out humorous partners? To what extent does humor in a relationship predict its longterm success? Is a humorous opening line a good strategy in dating?

Monday 11/10 - Applications of humor in the workplace, leadership, and education

How can a business use humor to outperform its competitors? How can a person use humor in their interviews or resume to land a job? How can humor help one negotiate a better deal? What are the dangers and opportunities of using humor in a workplace?

Wednesday 11/12 - Influence and persuasion

How does one persuade another person to say yes? First, we will discuss social psychology theories of influence and persuasion and how people form implicit and explicit attitudes.

Monday 11/17 - Persuasion and humor

We will build onto the last class's readings on theories of persuasion by connecting them to humor. How can humor help or hurt a persuasion attempt? What types of jokes help or hurt one's message? How do jokes often carry contradicting implicit and explicit messages? Do jokes change peoples' attitudes or are they only funny because they fit an audience's preconceived attitudes?

Wednesday 11/19 - Humor in politics

Does humor have a place in politics? We will apply our learnings about influence and persuasion to the domain of politics and review past examples of politicians using humor to engage voters (e.g., trump nicknames for other politicians, KamalaHQ TikTok, past debate moments and political stunts).

Monday 11/24 - Positive emotions and their expression

Humor involves the positive emotions of mirth and amusement. There are several other positive emotions that have been well-researched. We will study them and what techniques are used to enhance them (e.g., savoring, gratitude journaling). Then we will discuss how findings in these fields might apply to humor appreciation.

Thanksgiving Break**Wednesday 4/23 - Health and humor**

How is humor used therapeutically? Do people who laugh more, live longer? What are the health benefits of laughter? We will practice laughter yoga in class, and explore whether laughter can still be beneficial even when faked.

Monday 12/1 - Session left open to explore additional topics students want to explore**Wednesday 12/3 - Session left open to explore additional topics students want to explore**

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university’s mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or “recycle” work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Policy on Use of Technology in the Classroom

Security of Course Content. All material presented in class or discussion, sent via email, or posted on Brightspace is “all rights reserved.” In addition, some of it is copyrighted and distributed for in-class use only by a publishing corporation. You may not store these materials—whether on paper or electronically—for use by students not presently enrolled in this course, nor may you post the materials anywhere on the internet. Out of fairness to all current and future students, please do your part to protect our course content.

Please see the addendum attached to the syllabus for detailed information about Student Support Services and Academic Integrity.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Integrity:

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see [the student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender - and power- based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.