

**Analyzing Stand-Up Comedy: Laughter, Language, and Rhetoric**

Tufts University – Experimental College

Section Details: Braker 226, Monday 6:00 - 8:30 p.m., Sep 10, 2012 - Dec 10, 2012

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**Course Description**

1.0 credit, Letter-graded

*This course will count toward the Mass Communications and Media Studies Minor as a Humanities and the Arts elective***WARNING:** *This course is suitable for mature audiences only.*

What makes us laugh? Who makes us laugh? And why do we pay people to make us laugh? This course will seek answers to these questions (and others), approaching them from the perspective of rhetoric. Are stand-up comedians rhetors? And if they are, what exactly is the nature and purpose of their rhetoric? We will begin with a brief introduction to classical rhetoric before moving into epistemic rhetoric and Kenneth Burke's concepts of dramatism and the "comic frame." These notions of rhetoric will serve as a starting point for a critical (and creative) approach to stand-up comedy. From Lenny Bruce and George Carlin to Bill Hicks and Chris Rock, we will listen to and watch performances by some of the most notable stand-up comedians of the last fifty years. We will ask questions about language, race, gender, class, and the function and nature of comedy and laughter. Through writing we will produce genealogies of our own senses of humor, as well as perform rhetorical analyses of comedy performances. The course will culminate with an evening of performances by the class: Each student will produce a carefully crafted (if not necessarily funny) "five minute spot."

Cultural critic and rhetorician Kenneth Burke writes, "The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle." While Burke isn't talking about stand-up comedy, it seems clear that stand-up comedy—as performance, as art, as *rhetoric*—serves as an appropriate scene for critical exploration and rhetorical analysis. This course's pairing of something familiar, popular, and vulgar (stand-up) with something often denigrated and rarely studied (rhetoric), will produce surprising insight, both in terms of ideology and epistemology. Class time will be primarily devoted to discussion of assigned materials. We will engage rhetorical methodologies, analyzing comedic works as we would political speeches or works of literature. In addition to performing rhetorical analysis, we will also engage in critical/personal reflection and participate in group dialogue and projects.

**Texts and Materials:****Readings:** Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*; book excerpts and articles available online**Films:** Bill Cosby: *Himself*, *History of the Joke with Lewis Black*, Richard Pryor: *Live in Concert*, *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, Chris Rock: *Bigger & Blacker*, *Punchline*, Sara Silverman: *Jesus is Magic*, American: *The Bill Hicks Story*, Louis C.K.: *Chewed Up*, *The Aristocrats***Audio:** George Carlin, *FM/AM*, *Class Clown*, *Occupation: Foole*; Marc Maron, *Tickets Still Available*, *WTF with Marc Maron*; David Cross, *Shut Up You F\*\*king Baby*

**Comment [k1]:** While preparing for my contemporary rhetoric Ph.D. comprehensive exam, I developed a course proposal for Tufts University's Experimental College. According to their website, "The ExCollege offers small, participation-based courses that engage Tufts undergraduates in ideas shaping the world today. Our range of courses offer critical contexts for thinking about politics, popular culture, world religions, technology, law, communications, social issues, business, healthcare, ethics and more."

I responded to the ExCollege's general call for course proposals with a course that paired rhetorical theory and stand-up comedy. My proposal was chosen out of more than 150 submissions and, after a formidable interview process my course was selected for fall of 2012.

My goal and primary objective was simple: treat stand-up as rhetoric and subject stand-up performance to rigorous rhetorical analysis. The course was populated by a wide variety of undergraduates from all academic levels and disciplines. In addition to being writing intensive, course readings ranged from dense theoretical texts (Kenneth Burke and Judith Butler), to journalistic surveys of key moments in stand-up history, to seminal and current stand-up performances (both audio and video). The course culminated in performances by students that were then reflected on in writing.

In more than fifteen years of teaching, this course stands as my favorite because of its range in popular and intellectual engagement. It is by far the most interdisciplinary course I've taught in that it engages media studies, performance, rhetoric, composition, comedy, cultural and critical theory. Psychology and performance art majors benefited equally from the range of ideas and concepts presented by the course.

This course has continued to fuel my own research agenda; it has inspired conference presentations and the creation of a special session panel at MLA 2016. I am also working on two articles related to the issues raised by the pairings in this course and the wonderful work produced by my students.

## Assignments

### Inquiry Notebook

Throughout the term, you will keep an **Inquiry Notebook** in the form of an online journal. The purpose of the **IN** is to provide you with a space to *make sense* of the ideas we take up—by working with the readings, commenting or extending classroom discussion, generating ideas for projects, trying out ideas, etc. You will be responsible for composing a minimum of 500 words of informal but substantive writing *per week*. The **IN** should be a place where you feel free to try out ideas, to take risks, and generally to explore without worrying about polishing your prose, as you will in your formal writing for the course.

### Paper 1: What Makes You Laugh?

Write a genealogical inquiry into the development of your sense of humor.

4-6 pages

*Additional assignment details will be made available through course website.*

### Paper 2: Rhetorical Analysis of a Stand-Up Performance

Choose a comedian and a specific performance (one not included in syllabus; must be approved by instructor) and write a deep rhetorical analysis of the work drawing on course readings and at least one additional piece of rhetorical theory.

6-8 pages

*Additional assignment details will be made available through course website.*

### Final Project: “5 Minute Spot”

Most comedians start out by doing short sets at “open mic” nights. Later, when comedians land spots on late night television shows they are asked to put together five minutes of their best material. This final project will be in the spirit of the five minute spot. Write and prepare to perform a five minute set based on the issues covered in the class. In addition to performing this set, write a context document that explains your process and how the spot represents work conducted in this course.

5 minute Performance / 4-6 page Context Document

*Additional assignment details will be made available through course website.*

### Grading:

Inquiry Notebook: 15%

Paper 1: 20%

Paper 2: 25%

Final Project: 30%

Participation: 10%

### Class Schedule (subject to change)

*Readings, films, and audio recordings with ( \* ) will be provided by instructor.*

*All films are available through Netflix.*

Week	Topics	Assignments	What's due?
9/10	<i>Introduction:</i> Ontological questions about comedy, laughter, and rhetoric		
9/17	<i>Stand-up Comedy and Rhetoric:</i> Epistemic rhetoric; Kenneth Burke and “comic corrective”; Bill Cosby	<b>Read:</b> Burke, “Comedy, Humor, the Ode” and “Comic Correctives” *; Blakesley, “Dramatism and Rhetoric” * <b>Watch:</b> <i>Bill Cosby: Himself</i>	<b>Inquiry Notebook</b> <i>entries always due before each class</i>
9/24	Telling Jokes and Getting Laughs: Physiological Laughter and a brief history of stand-up	<b>Read:</b> Davis, “Physiological Laughter: The Subject Convulsed” *; Butler, “On Linguistic Vulnerability” * <b>Watch:</b> <i>History of the Joke with Lewis Black</i> *	

10/1	<i>The obscene and the polemical:</i> Lenny Bruce and George Carlin	<b>Read:</b> Zoglin, <i>Comedy at the Edge</i> , pp. 1-40; Limon, "Inrage: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-Up"* <b>Listen:</b> Carlin, <i>FM/AM, Class Clown*</i>	<b>Paper 1</b>
10/9	<i>Comedy Goes to Court:</i> Carlin and "FCC v. Pacifica Foundation" <b>PLEASE NOTE:</b> We will meet on Tuesday evening because of Holiday on 10/8	<b>Read:</b> Tremblay, "FCC v. Pacifica Foundation," from <i>Free Speech on Trial*</i> <b>Listen:</b> Carlin, <i>Occupation: Foole*</i>	
10/15	<i>Comedy, Race, and Rhetoric (part one):</i> Richard Pryor and Patricia Williams	<b>Read:</b> Zoglin, <i>Comedy at the Edge</i> , pp. 41-64; Williams, "The Death of the Profane"* <b>Watch:</b> <i>Richard Pryor: Live in Concert</i>	
10/22	<i>Comedy, Race and Rhetoric (part two): Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy</i>	<b>Watch:</b> <i>Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy Rock, Bigger &amp; Blacker</i>	
10/29	<i>Women and comedy (part one):</i> Is stand-up a "man's" job?	<b>Read:</b> Glenn, "Engendering Silence," from <i>Rhetoric and Silence*</i> ; Zoglin, <i>Comedy at the Edge</i> , pp.181-194. <b>Watch:</b> <i>Punchline</i>	<b>Paper 2</b>
11/5	<i>Women and comedy (part two):</i> Stand-up and feminism	<b>Read:</b> Davis, "A Rhetoric of Laughter for Feminist Politics," from <i>Breaking up [at] Totality*</i> <b>Watch:</b> Silverman, <i>Jesus is Magic</i>	
11/19	<i>Extreme, Absurd, and Personal (part one):</i> The "extremists," past and present	<b>Read:</b> Zoglin, <i>Comedy at the Edge</i> , pp. 159-180 <b>Watch:</b> <i>American: The Bill Hicks Story</i>	
11/26	<i>Extreme, Absurd, and Personal (part one):</i> The "Alternative" comedians	<b>Listen:</b> Maron, <i>Tickets Still Available*</i> , <i>WTF with Marc Maron</i> (podcast), Episode 200* <b>Watch:</b> <i>Louis C.K.: Chewed Up, Louie</i> (season 1; episode 2)	
12/3	<i>Extreme, Absurd, and Political:</i> Comedy after 9/11	<b>Listen:</b> Cross, <i>Shut Up You F**king Baby*</i> ; <i>WTF with Marc Maron</i> (podcast), Episode 145* <b>Watch:</b> <i>The Aristocrats</i>	
12/10	<i>A Night at the Improv:</i> Student performances		<b>Final Project</b>

### ASSIGNMENTS

#### *Inquiry Notebook*

Throughout the term, you will keep an **Inquiry Notebook** in the form of an online journal. The purpose of the **IN** is to provide you with a space to *make sense* of the ideas we take up—by working with the readings, commenting or extending classroom discussion, generating ideas for projects, trying out ideas, etc. You will be responsible for composing a minimum of 500 words of informal but substantive writing **per week**. The **IN** should be a place where you feel free to try out ideas, to take risks, and generally to explore without worrying about polishing your prose, as you will in your formal writing for the course.

Your first entry is due before class Monday (Sept. 24).

**Paper 1: What Makes You Laugh?**

Write a genealogical inquiry into the development of your sense of humor.  
4-6 pages

In "Transnational Feminist Rhetorics in a Digital World," Mary Queen establishes a context for rhetorical exploration:

*Rhetorical genealogy* is rhetorical analysis that examines multiple processes of structuring representations, rather than [seeking] to identify the original intentions or final effects of structured (and thus already stabilized) representations. A *genealogical investigation works to uncover not only the meaning of meaning, but the structuring of meaning*, that is, the *cultural practices and rhetorics* through which particular representations and interpretations gain validity and power. (my emphasis; 476)

Here Queen moves away from a more traditional rhetorical analysis: The search for meaning in a text is, by necessity, structured and stabilized. It seeks to find finite and definable moments. Such moments ground both the text and the analysis. By examining the *processes* (the meaning of meaning), we can better attend to how finite and definable moments are linked together and thereby gain validity and power. Such an exercise would (and does) thereby offer a site for more dynamic speculation and conceptualization. By landing on the links between texts, we can move linearly back and forth *and* we can move globally, webbing ever outward in nonlinear motion(s).

In *Attitudes Toward History*, Kenneth Burke has this to say about what he calls the "comic frame":

The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to "transcend" occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his "assets" column, under the head of "experience." In sum, the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would "transcend" himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the nonrational. (171)

For your first "formal" paper for this course, compose a rhetorical genealogy of your sense of humor. Use Queen's definition as a guide to answering epistemological and ontological questions about the development of your 'comic frame.'

Questions your response should attempt to answer:

- *What makes you laugh and why?*
- *Who makes you laugh and why?*
- *What is your definition of "funny"?*
- *How has your upbringing and your education shaped your sense of humor?*
- *How has your sense of humor developed and changed over the course of your life?*

Key phrases from Queen's definition of "rhetorical genealogy" and ways to think about them:

- **multiple processes of structuring representations**  
Rhetorical genealogy is about "multiple processes" not "original intentions." As such, search your memory: Look for moments that are not necessarily originary (the first time you remember laughing) but are indicative of a bigger picture of your comic sensibility. Also, consider outside perspectives: What do your friends and family think about your sense of humor and where it comes from? Ask them about what makes you laugh the most and how they get you to laugh?

This could be (will be) hard. We've been schooled to write and analyze linearly. Genealogy is

**Comment [k2]:** This assignment blended autoethnography with rhetorical analysis. It was particularly inspired by Mary Queen's concept of "rhetorical genealogy."

I wanted my students to interrogate their senses of humor from multiple perspectives in order to not only get a better sense of why they were drawn to certain kinds of humor but how those inclinations manifested ideologically.

about fields of influence—so resist searching in the usual places. Also: Don't be afraid to take chances with your essay's structure and organization. I put "formal" in quotes above because I want you to take this writing seriously (as you would an essay assignment for a class in your major), but I also want you to attempt multimodal composition practices. (If you have questions about what I mean, please ask.)

- **investigation**

Take this seriously. For myself, I could chart a path to an easy final draft for this assignment. I've written about moments in my past that serve as links to my comic frame. I could easily write a "personal narrative" about the first time I heard George Carlin and be done with it. Except, that's not what I'm looking for here. I'm looking for some serious investigation. Dig deep. And then just keep digging.

- **meaning of meaning / structuring of meaning**

This is where we really get to the rhetorical analysis aspects of the assignment. It's one thing to investigate and collect stories/observations for your genealogy. Finding (writing through) the *meaning of meaning* and the *structure of meaning* is where asking the hard questions comes in to play. This is where you'll need to think beyond yourself as an easy text: Go back and take a look at Blakesley's work with Burke's dramatism and consider using the pentad on your artifacts (you). If you can point to a moment that illustrates a defining moment of your comic frame, then consider how that moment is situated historically (questions of race, class, gender, etc.). For instance, George Carlin is essential to my sense of humor. What does this say about where I'm from, who I am, and how my life is/was influenced by Carlin? How might this be different if I most identified with Chris Rock? If I'd grown up in urban Detroit? Or rural Alabama? Find the places that resonate for you. Then step back and evaluate them.

- **cultural practices / rhetorics**

Let me tell you a story: I was freshman in college in 1992, the year Bill Clinton was elected president for his first term. I had just turned eighteen that September and voted for the first time. I distinctly remember the eve of the election—my dorm room door open—hearing a hall mate walking down the corridor chanting "Bush sucks! Clinton rules!" In that moment, I clearly remember connecting the presidential election process to the dynamics of a football game, with fans incensed to little motive beyond seeing one side win and the other lose. My sense of American politics, then, was "enlightened" (underscored) by the cultural practices circulating around me. This rhetoric ("Clinton rules!") was deeply embedded in cultural practices—ones from which I found myself alienated and opposed. This is the kind of self-analysis I would like to see in your writing.

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## **Paper 2: Rhetorical Analysis of a Stand-Up Performance**

Choose a comedian and a specific performance (one not included in syllabus; must be approved by instructor) and write a deep rhetorical analysis of the work drawing on course readings.

6-8 pages

In the first chapter of *Elements of Dramatism*, David Blakesley writes,

Dramatism analyzes language and thought as modes of action rather than as means of conveying information... [Dramatism] is a systematic method for analyzing human communication in all its complexity. It thus shares with rhetoric a focus on human symbol-use as a social process of both describing and influencing motives. The pentad—Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose—functions as a form of rhetorical analysis that can help us understand the presence of ambiguity and persuasion in any interpretation that guides action.

Identification, or an alignment of interests and motive, is the aim of rhetoric, with consubstantiality

**Comment [k3]:** In some ways, this paper was the most straightforward of the class: analyze a stand-up performance by one of your favorite comedians (and not already included on the syllabus). However, because I had introduced them to Burke's concept of dramatism and the pentad, I asked them to approach their analysis in his terms.

(shared substance) being its ideal. Dramatism helps us understand the resources of ambiguity that make identification possible. It *also* helps us study identification's counter-part, division, as a dialectic between competing and cooperating forces. For Burke, human relations should be guided by the fullest understanding possible of the basis of our disagreements, our wars of words (logomachy).

Here Blakesley adeptly sums much of what we've talked about regarding rhetoric, identification and consubstantiality. What we've been working on all semester is applying these and other rhetorical principles to stand-up comedy. Up to this point, I've selected the material for our inquiry. With this assignment, it's your turn.

**For your second paper, you will be required to conduct an in-depth rhetorical analysis of a comedy performance by a stand-up comedian of your choosing.**

**PLEASE NOTE:** You must choose a comedian not included on our syllabus. This extends to comedians we haven't covered yet (Louis C.K., Sarah Silverman, David Cross, Marc Maron, and Bill Hicks are off limits). Furthermore, each of you must write about a different comedian.

**Requirements:**

- Write about a comedian not covered on the syllabus. Must be approved by instructor.
- Provide background context (situate your analysis in cultural/historical contexts).
- Write about a specific, identifiable performance (a televised comedy special, a comedy album, etc.).
- Specifically cite course readings (Butler, Burke, Blakesley, Glenn, Davis, Limon, Zoglin).
- Present your analysis in academic essay format with logically organized argument(s). Be sure to properly cite sources in MLA format.

**Suggestions:**

- **Pick yer comedian.**

As I've mentioned in class, this course is not about providing an historical survey of stand-up. It's focus has been more on how comedy works and how it intersects with rhetoric. I chose comedians that would allow us to hit certain areas—a little bit of history, race, gender, etc. I always intended for this second paper to be your opportunity to bring in something (someone) you love. This is your chance to direct discussion. I will be asking all of you to bring in some bits and talk about the comedians you choose so that we can extend our discussion beyond the scope of the syllabus.

Having said that, I have a couple concerns: First and foremost is that we don't have any overlap. I want all of you to pick different comedians so we get a wide range of talents for discussion. I don't want six papers on Patton Oswalt or Russell Peters. So we need to co-ordinate our efforts. I would like to ask all of you to send me your top three choices. First come first serve. If someone else gets to your first choice first, then I'll move down your list of three. I will try to guarantee that you get to write about one of your three.

- **Context**

The focus of this essay will be your analysis, that's certain. However, you will need to provide some context—historical and/or cultural—to situate your comedian and his/her performance. For instance, if I were to write about Carlin, I could use Zoglin's chapter to introduce him and provide context for my analysis of *Class Clown*. I could also turn to *Dirty Words*, a biography of Carlin. And finally, I would also use some of my personal connection to Carlin to situate my observations.

For a paper on Carlin this kind of context would be relatively easy to find since others have already written about him. You may find that your comedian is too young, or too marginal to have

much “context” writing available. Don’t sweat this, though. Find and use what you can. Most comedians now have their own websites with “About Me” pages, and you are even free to go to places like Wikipedia (though, I would encourage you poach Wikipedia sources instead of using the internet encyclopedia directly). If you struggle with finding good context, let me know and I will help.

- **This is a rhetorical analysis**

Please keep in mind: This paper’s entire being hinges on your application of rhetorical theory to stand-up comedy. The “easiest” route (which I won’t *necessarily* endorse) is probably to go back, re-read the Blakesley chapter and use Burke’s dramatism (pentad) as your argument’s framework. Feel free to do this; however, I’d also like you to use Davis and Butler. I’ll add that you’re more than welcome to bring in additional rhetorical theory. Keep in mind, though, that too much framework can lead to too little analysis—and analysis is the most important part of this assignment. I will be looking for a) how well you can incorporate our course readings (summary, paraphrasing, quoting; the hallmarks of academic writing) and how well you apply those readings to stand-up (synthesis).

Along with how well you incorporate and synthesize our course readings, I will be looking for *specific* analysis of a *specific* performance. I’ve used that word a lot here: specific. And that’s because it’s an important word for what I want you to do: Be specific. Treat your comedian’s performance like you would a text in a literature class. As such, you’ll need to provide lots of details and even quote directly from the performance. What I don’t want is general reference to parts of the performance. Don’t do this: “C.K. talks about such and such...” Do this: “In C.K.’s bit about Ewan McGregor from his 2007 comedy special *Shameless*, he makes the observation that, ‘There is one guy out there...’”

- **Academic Essay and MLA Citation**

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: This is an academic essay and should look, sound, and feel like one. That means logical organization, identifiable thesis, and proper documentation, sourcing, and formatting. I’ll help with some of this. Below you’ll find proper MLA Works Cited list citations for our course readings. All you’ll need to do is copy and paste these; then use page numbers and authors in your in-text citations. Be sure, however, to properly write your in-text citations. If you’re at all confused about how to do this, go here: [OWL MLA Formatting and Style Guide](#). Or ask me. I’ll probably mention this in class, but I don’t want to spend too much time going over formatting specifics—especially since it’s not that hard to follow a few simple rules, all of which are on the OWL website.

*Citations for Blakesley, Burke, Butler, Davis, Glenn, Limon, and Zoglin (Remember: These need to use a hanging indent):*

Blakesley, David. *The Elements of Dramatism*. New York: Longman, 2002.

Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.

Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Davis, D. Diane. *Breaking Up (at) Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2000.

Glenn, Cheryl. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.

Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

Zoglin, Richard. *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2008.

**Final Project: "Five Minute Spot" and Context Memo**

Most comedians start out by doing short sets at "open mic" nights. Later, when comedians land spots on late night television shows they are asked to put together five minutes of their best material. This final project will be in the spirit of the five minute spot. Write and prepare to perform a three to five minute set based on the work we've done in class. In addition to performing this set, write a context document that explains your process and how the spot represents work conducted in this course.

**IMPORTANT!!**

**Please note that in order to receive full credit for your Final Project, you must perform AND submit a Context Memo. If I do not receive a Context Memo from you, you will not receive credit for your performance!!!**

**Performance**

*3 to 5 minute spot*

Limon writes,

the collective experience of humor, like the personal experience of pain, fills its moment and perishes; reflection misprizes it of necessity. (Laughter may be the social equivalent of pain, the *group* incorrigible.) Third, you cannot be retroactively disabused by a critic. To criticize a joke is to miss it, because the joke, as Freud demonstrates, is, in the first instance, an escape from criticism to a prior happiness. (11-2)

While we've spent much of the semester testing Limon's observations, what we should all be able to agree upon now is that stand-up comedy depends on **performance** and **audience**. What we do with the performance, as audience members, afterwards is something very different (just as necessary, I would argue) from what happens in the moment when we **collectively experience** humor.

It is this **experience** of humor (as a performer) that this final assignment pursues. That is, what better way to test what we've learned—what better way to **understand** stand-up—than to do it?

So for your final assignment, you will put together material for performance—and then perform.

Given the potentially polemic nature of comedy (again, something with which we are very familiar at this point), I want to establish some ground rules for your performances:

- **Material must reflect awareness and synthesis of course concepts.**  
While I don't expect anyone to perform comedic bits about Judith Butler, I do want your material to be sensitive to and mindful of the bigger issues we've discussed all semester. Remember: Stand-up is its own kind of rhetoric, and the words you use, the bits you create, will have ideological significance and reverberations.
- **Material must be, more or less, original and identifiable as yours.**  
No Dane Cooks here, please. While I am fine with material that shows its influences, I want your bits to be original to you and your experiences. This is why I've asked you to work on material in your **Inquiry Notebooks** and test it in front of your classmates.

**Comment [k4]:** This assignment still stands as one of my favorites. In writing classes, I teach skill transfer and multimodality, and I have successfully deployed multimodal composition projects. I drew on my experience with multimodality for this assignment, which operates on a progressive assignment sequence methodology: Students were asked to journal performance ideas, share those ideas informally in group workshops, and cultivate those ideas into a "set" that they would then perform at the end of the semester. We practiced performances prior to our "comedy night." Following Jody Shipka's approach to multimodal projects, I asked for a kind of statement of goals and choices in the form of a reflective memo produced post-performance.

This assignment explicitly engages concepts of public writing and rhetoric, performance and delivery. In addition to performance and writing responsibilities, the students were also charged with producing the "event," from creating flyers and posters, to booking the venue and arranging for refreshment.



- **Material that intentionally courts the polemical must be justifiable within the matrix of our course concepts and readings.**

This is a fancy way of saying, if you perform material that's edgy (from the coarse and vulgar to the potentially racist, bigoted, sexist, homophobic, etc.), you better be prepared to defend it. Think back to our discussions of Daniel Tosh, Sarah Silverman, and Gallagher. If you do material like Tosh or Silverman, then you need to be able to explain the nature and motivation of your rhetoric. If you do material like the latter day Gallagher, I will not support it.

I may even get the hook and yank you from the stage. Finally: Just be careful. You can take risks. I appreciate risk taking. What I don't appreciate (or support) is stubborn, willful ignorance and bigotry.

- **Timing is everything!**

While I will likely not penalize you for *under*-performing, I will penalize you if you go over your allotted time. Everyone needs their stage time; if you go over, this might create problems for those performing later in the evening. So please keep it to five minutes at the most!

- **Don't worry, be happy!**

I've noted on several occasions that your material doesn't necessarily need to "kill." So don't worry about being funny. I will not be grading you based on how much laughter you provoke. You will be graded on two things: Making it through your spot; writing a context memo about your experience. So as long as you can muster the courage to step up to the mic, you're golden! It's the experience that matters not the material. So try not to get too worked up over performing.

- **Your classmates and I support you.**

While we can't be sure how the audience will respond to us, we can be sure that our community of learners is also a community of supporters. **For performers:** Know that the rest of us support you and have faith in you. **For the class-as-audience:** Please give your unconditional support to those performing. Show this support by listening, engaging, laughing, and being present in every sense of the word. This is why everyone needs to be present for all performances. We are all obligated to each other.

## Context Memo

*equivalent of 4-6 pages*

The second part of this assignment is almost as important as the first: While performing is, in and of itself, important, **reflecting** on that performance is also valuable, particularly in determining how the act of performing matches with what we've been doing all semester long. Put differently: We've been analyzing comedic acts from the outside, peeling back layers of meaning and ideology to find rhetoric and other goodies for intellectual consumption. By performing, we are turning that formula around: We are working from the inside toward the outside.

So, after you perform, I would like you to write a memo, addressed to me, that provides reflection on the experience and connects the experience of your performance to the ideas we've been working with all semester.

**Your memo should seek to answer some, if not all, of these questions:**

- *What was it like to perform comedy? What was it like to be on stage instead of in the audience?*
- *How did the audience's reactions affect your performance?*
- *Were you surprised by any of the reactions to your performance?*
- *Did you surprise yourself?*
- *What went well? What didn't go well? What might you do differently if you had to perform again?*
- *What did you learn from the experience?*
- *Can you perform a rhetorical analysis of your own performance?*

- *What would Judith Butler or Kenneth Burke think about your performance?*
- *Did performing change your perception(s) of stand-up?*
- *Looking back over what we've read, watched, and listened to this semester, can you think of anything that directly connects to your experience performing? Did your performance change your mind about anything? Reinforce it?*

**Your memo should also include references to course materials.**

For example: "When I was performing, I thought about Butler's comments about interpellation and..." You don't need to worry about citation styles, or using specific quotes (though these would be appreciated).

**Your memo needs to address the points I've laid out here.**

As long as it carefully and honestly addresses these requirements, I will not be concerned with page length or word count. What I want most is sincere and critical reflection.

**Your memo should be presented in simple memo format.** Feel free to use this as a guide (click on the file and simply fill in your information): [Memo format](#).