

Communication Arts 300: Film Comedy
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Spring 2026

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Class Meetings

Lecture: Mon & Wed 12:05-12:55p
Screening: Tues 6:30p
Vilas 4070

Discussion Sections

601: Wed 1:20-2:10p
602: Wed 2:25-3:15p
603: Thurs 11:00-11:50a
604: Thurs 12:05-12:55p
605: Thurs 1:20-2:10p



Course Description

This course is a dynamic, analytic exploration into the design and impact of the comedy genre in American film. Our goal is to understand how comedy films are designed to elicit laughter according to their historical/cultural context, as well as the impact these films have and have had on the Hollywood film industry and our culture at large. To this end, we will: 1) develop basic tools for film analysis and criticism to appreciate how filmmakers can design their films for comedic effects, 2) investigate theories of why we laugh, 3) examine the roles and types of film comedy in the Hollywood filmmaking system over time, and 4) consider how comedies can help us encounter ethical, philosophical, and theoretical challenges of modern life. Through lectures on weekly topics, key readings in comedy theory and film studies, screenings of classic and contemporary comedy films, and lively discussion in small groups, we'll explore how comedy works, why it matters, and how it reflects cultural values and issues—with no shortage of laughter along the way. 😊

Learning Outcomes

- Explain what makes a comedy a comedy
- Distinguish different forms and techniques of comedy
- Summarize key theories of humor and evaluate their pros, cons, and overlaps
- Discern formal, narrative, and rhetorical variables shaping particular comedy films
- Identify social and ethical values and pitfalls of humor and comedy

Required Texts: All readings will be provided by the instructor via Canvas

Assignments

Participation

Much of the work we will do in this class depends on engaged listening and collaboration. Towards these ends, it is important to come to lectures and discussions prepared to contribute (especially for the latter). Please come having done the listed reading for that day/week, and feel free to bring any questions you may have regarding them. Asking such questions and contributing to class discussion demonstrates thoughtful and intentional participation.

Attendance

Attendance will be taken for in-person classes, discussion sections, and screenings. If you miss more than 2 lectures or discussion sections, respectively, your grade will be automatically deducted by one letter grade. I understand, however, that life happens. Excused absences will be provided in the cases of genuinely extenuating circumstances such as family emergencies or illness. If you must miss a class for extenuating circumstances, please simply let me or your TA know via email as soon as you are able. Excused absences for health issues should be accompanied by a doctor's note.

Screenings

All the films we will watch this semester were designed to be watched with audiences who can laugh together. For this reason and others, attendance at screenings is required. Our screening facility in Vilas 4070 is an excellent venue, and you will find that the experience of watching these films—some of which will be presented *on 35mm film*—in a theater setting with high-quality picture and sound allows you to see and hear more than watching on a laptop or TV. Plus, it is a great opportunity to give a movie your full attention and shut out other distractions.

If you have an extenuating circumstance which will keep you from attending, or if you have a standing conflict, please let me know as soon as possible. As much as I value in-class screenings, I do not want the screening requirement to be a reason somebody chooses not to take this class.

Lab Notebooks

Throughout the semester, you will keep a notebook that tracks your thoughts, ideas, and responses to our weekly screenings, readings, and discussions. The content of your writing will be primarily determined by prompts delivered in-class and via Canvas. There will be four response-prompts over the course of the semester: two written in-class and two written outside of class. The extent to which you use your notebooks outside of these specific prompts is up to you. That said, I recommend using your notebooks as a space to take notes during class, work through ideas, study for the exams, et cetera. Using your notebook in such a manner is one way to signal your participation beyond just speaking in class.

This assignment is designed to emphasize process. Entries do not need to be, and often should not be, polished essays. They should be exploratory, specific, and thoughtful. By keeping your lab notebook, you should be developing consistent habits of observation and analysis, applying theoretical concepts and historical context to films, and building evidence of writing that demonstrates attentive engagement.

Your lab notebook must be handwritten, so please be sure to use legible handwriting. Your writing prompts will depend on the learning goals of that particular unit. Please bring your lab notebook to class every day, as we will often be using it during class time.

Quizzes

A total of five multiple-choice quizzes will be proctored during discussion section over the course of the semester with advance notice. They will be based on the assigned readings, films, and lectures. I will drop your lowest quiz score.

Exams

The midterm and final exams in this course are there to substantiate key learning outcomes. The midterm will primarily test your ability to summarize, identify, and apply theories of humor in the context of film comedy. The final will primarily ask you to summarize and identify comedic sub-genres and their relation to the Hollywood film and media industry. Both will also ask you to reflect on the social and ethical dimensions of film comedy.

Grade Breakdown

The grade distribution of this course is designed so that students who attend all meetings and complete all in-class work in good faith should receive a passing grade.

Participation and Attendance: 30%

Lab Notebooks: 20%

Quizzes: 15%

Midterm Exam: 15%

Final Exam: 20%

Grade Scale: A=93-100 AB=88-92 B=83-87 BC=78-82 C=70-77 D=60-69 F= 0-59

Content Advisory

Comedy often presents situations and language which transgress everyday norms of social decorum and morality. Comic amusement is widely recognized as unfolding within a 'bracketed frame'—a separate arena in which normally offensive material may be granted expression in a playful and ostensibly harmless way. That said, personal sensibilities and experiences differ considerably, and completely sequestering comedy from real-world emotions and effects is impossible. Indeed, we will discuss cases in class where comedy has been used to attack and dehumanize others.

We trust students to make thoughtful decisions about their curriculum choices based on their own particular backgrounds, interests, and sensibilities. If you are concerned about the possibility of exposure to potentially offensive material, a class exploring film comedy may not necessarily be the best choice.

We will do our best to give a heads up when dealing with controversial material, but students should not count on trigger warnings. They tend to interfere with aesthetic effects; they tacitly position you as unable to deal with tough subject matter; and on a practical level, instructors, try as they might, may forget that a film or other media object contains potentially upsetting content. Furthermore, findings in the social sciences increasingly suggest that they can be just as harmful and triggering as the content itself, occasionally even more so. Please accept this content advisory as a kind of blanket trigger warning. We value making this class a safe space for all students. In our understanding, an academic safe space is not one in which everyone is always comfortable, however, but a forum in which all thoughtful voices and perspectives are welcomed, listened to, and respected in a common good-faith effort to better understand the world around us.

Course Policies

Office Hours

I highly encourage you to attend office hours if you have any questions or concerns about upcoming assignments or course material. You do not need an appointment; simply stop by sometime during the times listed at the top of this syllabus. If you would like to meet outside these listed times, send me an email and I will do my best to accommodate. Additionally, you may request to meet for office hours over Zoom.

Email

In-depth inquiries are best suited to office hours, but if you have a quick question or concern, feel free to send me an email. Always consult the syllabus or assignment sheet beforehand, as your inquiry may already be answered there. When sending an email, I ask that you follow proper email etiquette: open with a greeting, and close with a salutation and your name. Use full sentences, and always include a subject.

Please allow me 24-48 hours (Monday-Friday) to respond. Emails sent on a Friday afternoon may not receive a response until the following Monday. If I do not respond within that amount of time, feel free to send me a follow-up.

Communication

All pertinent class communications will be conducted exclusively through UW-Madison email. I will occasionally send out mass emails to communicate significant course information. It is your responsibility to keep up with these communications and read them carefully.

Technology

You may use laptops or tablets for notetaking, research, and accessing course resources during class. However, I ask that keep these devices put away when they are not necessary and that you do not use them for texting, social media, or other potentially distracting non-class related activities.

Student Conduct

Like other artistic mediums, narrative films can be used to explore pertinent political, moral, and philosophical issues. Comedy, especially, is a form which is often used to confront such issues in a sort of 'play space' often outside the boundaries of manners, good taste, or even political correctness (see note above). Some of the films we will watch and discuss in this class may use humor in a manner you find offensive. Having the opportunity to work through some of these issues together in a classroom environment is one of the great advantages of taking a university-level film studies course.

During such discussions, however, it is imperative that you are respectful of other students' thoughts, ideas, and opinions. Don't cut others off or speak over them. If you want to respond, question, or disagree with someone, try to have a reasoned discussion and be open to viewpoints that are new or different. Always try to avoid having heated arguments. I also encourage you to resist making hasty judgements of your peers based on something they laugh at or fail to laugh at.

Most importantly, I have a zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory and/or abusive language, bullying, and name-calling. Students who engage in such behavior will be asked to leave the classroom.

Late Work

Except in the case of extenuating circumstances, late work will receive 5% off of your grade for each day it is late. If you have an extenuating circumstance that you believe prevents you from turning in an assignment on time, please reach out to your TA before the assignment is due at least forty-eight hours ahead of the due date so that we can figure out an extension that makes sense together.

Responding to Grades

In the event that you are not pleased with a grade, please wait 24 hours before emailing me or discussing it with me. Grades will not be discussed 5 minutes after an assignment has been returned. If after the 24-hour 'cool down' period you still wish to meet with me to discuss your grade, you may do so.

Extra Credit

Students may earn up to 2 percentage points of extra credit in this course. To do so one, you must participate in research studies in communication through a program called SONA. Each hour of research participation corresponds to 1% added to your final grade. A detailed student guide to accessing studies via SONA will be posted on the course website.

Academic Misconduct and Plagiarism

Plagiarism is an offense with serious consequences. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines "plagiarize" as to steal and pass off as one's own the ideas or words of another or to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

The following are some of the scenarios in which a student might be charged with academic misconduct in Communication Arts 300:

- Delivering all or a portion of another student's assignment as if it were your own.
- Failing to cite sources of ideas, paraphrases, or quotations in your work.
- Using ChatGPT or other forms of artificial intelligence to write your assignment.

Students found guilty of academic misconduct will receive an 'F' on the assignment and a letter concerning the affair will be forwarded to the Dean of Students for placement in the student's University file. More than one episode of academic misconduct during a student's career can result in expulsion from the University. If academic misconduct is discovered after a student has completed the course, the penalties may be levied retroactively, in which case the reason for the penalty will become part of the student's permanent transcript.

ChatGPT and Other LLMs

One of the core values of my teaching philosophy is human-centered education. This means that a fundamental goal of what and how I teach is geared toward helping my students flourish as human beings, and doing so as much as possible through social interaction and authentic engagement. Because Language Learning Machines are easily used to circumvent critical thinking and idea generation, are prone to bias and misrepresentation under the appearance of neutrality, and appropriate the hard work of human beings without attribution, I am skeptical (though not *entirely* doubtful) that they have a major role to play in higher education in the humanities.

At the same time, I recognize that AI is part of the world we live in, and I would be lying if I pretended I have not used it for certain things. I can see an engaged student potentially using AI for appropriate

tasks, such as summarizing key readings, ideas, and theories or providing a list of sources to use in a research project. However, even in such cases, students should be careful not to take everything an LLM says at face value, as these models are still as prone as ever to bias, hallucination, and sycophancy. Information provided by one of these tools should always be cross-referenced with a more trustworthy source.

This is all to say that there are *inappropriate* uses of AI in this and other courses, namely having AI produce a piece of writing which you pass off as your own. Such cases will be dealt with according to the policy regarding plagiarism stated above.

While AI can apparently do a lot of things, it cannot laugh. While we work on engaging our ‘new’ AI-filled world together, my hope is that we can use our study of film comedy to appreciate what it means to be human—and thus to use AI tools responsibly in your education, if you choose to.

Accessibility

We are deeply committed to providing an accessible and welcoming learning environment for all students. If you have formal disability accommodations through the McBurney Center, please provide me with your Faculty Notification Letter at the beginning of the semester. If you require testing accommodations such as additional time or small group testing, you must make arrangements with me at least three weeks ahead of the exam (advance notice is necessary in order for us to arrange separate rooms at busy times in the semester). Regardless of formal documentation, if you encounter any issues with the accessibility of this classroom, please let your TA know at any time, so that we can address concerns and find solutions.

The Bottom Line...

Lecturing a course is an opportunity I have been looking forward to for years. In truth, I can barely convey just how excited I am to teach and learn alongside you all this semester. Myself and your TA are here to help with this course in any way we can. Our commitment is to bring all of ourselves to our teaching every week. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to aid your success in this course and get everything out of it that you desire.

I. What is Film? What is Comedy?

Week 1

Introduction

Screening: *My Cousin Vinny* (1992, dir. Jonathan Lynn, 120 mins.)

Wed: Syllabus

Week 2

Studying Film, Studying Comedy

Mon: David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, "Film as Art," in *Film Art*, pp. 2-9, 17-34

Screening: *Step Brothers* (2008, dir. Adam McKay, 95 mins.)

Wed: Susanne K. Langer, "The Comic Rhythm," pp. 326-350

DUE IN DISCUSSION: LAB NOTEBOOK ENTRY #1

Week 3

Form, Style, and Narrative

Mon: Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, "Narrative Form," in *Film Art*, pp. 71-96

Screening: *The Gold Rush* (1928, dir. Charles Chaplin, 95 mins.) **35mm**

Wed: Noël Carroll, "Notes on the Sight Gag," in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, pp. 25-42
Geoff King, "Comedy and Narrative," in *Film Comedy*, pp. 19-32

II. What's so Funny: Theorizing Comedy

Week 4

Superiority Theory/Release Theory

Mon: Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 4-16
Excerpts from Plato and Aristotle, in *Reader in Comedy*, pp. 33-39

Screening: *The Music Box* (1932, dir. James Parrott, 29 mins.)
Duck Soup (1933, dir. Leo McCarey, 70 mins.)

Wed: Carroll, *Humour*, pp. 38-42
Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, pp. 145-149

DUE IN DISCUSSION: LAB NOTEBOOK ENTRY #2

Week 5
Incongruity Theory

Mon: Carroll, *Humour*, pp. 16-37

Screening: *Bringing Up Baby* (1938, dir. Howard Hawks, 102 mins.)

Wed: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 201-207

Week 6
Social Correction Theory/Comedy Ethics

Mon: Henri Bergson, excerpts from *Laughter*, 35 pgs (see Canvas).

Screening: *Draftee Daffy* (1945, dir. Bob Clampett, 7 mins.)
To Be or Not To Be (1942, dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 99 mins.)

Wed: No reading—good job finishing Bergson!

III. Sub-Genres and Industry

Week 7
The Musical Comedy

Mon: MIDTERM EXAM

Screening: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953, dir. Howard Hawks, 91 mins.) **35mm**

Wed: Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, “Film Genres,” in *Film Art*, pp. 328-339, 344-348

Week 8
The Studio Ensemble Comedy

Mon: Krutnick and Neale, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 96-109

Screening: *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963, dir. Stanley Kramer, 179 mins.)

Wed: No reading

Week 9
Comedy in the ‘New Hollywood’

Mon: Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” in *American Film History*, pp. 87-95

Screening: *A New Leaf* (1971, dir. Elaine May, 102 mins.)

Wed: Elizabeth Alsop, excerpts from *Elaine May*, pp. 1-12, 41-53

DUE IN DISCUSSION: LAB NOTEBOOK ENTRY #3

Week 10

The Spoof/Parody

Mon: King, "Parody and Satire," *Film Comedy*, pp. 93-128

Screening: *Young Frankenstein* (1974, dir. Mel Brooks, 106 mins.)

Wed: Michela Vanon Alliata, "'The Uses of Parody and the Practice of Laughter in Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*,'" pp. 178-192

SPRING BREAK

Week 11

Genre Hybrids: The Action Comedy

Mon: Cynthia M. King, "Comedy in Action," pp. 140-164

Screening: *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984, dir. Martin Brest, 105 mins.)

Wed: Brittney Michelle Edmonds, "Eddie Murphy's Last Laugh," pp. 240-261

IV. Film Comedy and the Modern World

Week 12

Dark Comedy and the Modern Absurd

Mon: Albert Camus, excerpts from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 8-12, 88-91

Screening: *Burn After Reading* (2008, Joel and Ethan Coen, 96 mins.)

Wed: King, "Painting it Black," excerpt from *Film Comedy*, pp. 185-196

DUE IN DISCUSSION: LAB NOTEBOOK ENTRY #4

Week 13

Modern Satire

Mon: No reading

Screening: *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping* (2016, dir. Akiva Schaffer, 87 mins.)

Wed: Addie Tsai, "Wardrobe Malfunction and Slapstick Humiliation," pp. 121-137

Week 14

Film Comedy and Media Futures

Mon: No reading

Screening: *Hundreds of Beavers* (2022, dir. Mike Cheslik, 108 mins.) **DCP**

Wed: FINAL EXAM