

## LIGHTENING BOLTS

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### FEATURE ARTICLE

#### **Humor: The Write Stuff**

I'm fascinated by humorous writers like Garrison Keillor and Robert Fulghum. They capture the richness of the human condition and entertain us with heartwarming humor. The humor tickles our funny bone yet it also *en-lightens* us metaphorically.

Bill Bryson is one of my favorite authors. His travel books have humorously captured the funny landscapes of England, Australia, Rural America and the Appalachian Trail. Consider the opening paragraph to his book *The Lost Continent*:

*I come from Des Moines. Somebody had to. When you come from Des Moines you either accept the fact without question and settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there forever and ever; or you spend your adolescence moaning at length about what a dump it is and how you can't wait to get out, and then you settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there forever and ever.*

The reader is drawn to Bryson's humor *and* his angle on small towns. Growing up in a rural area and having been "stuck" at various times in my life, I can easily relate to living out my days at a metaphorical Firestone factory. Bryson connects on several levels.

Anne Lamott's writing is not categorized as "humor" yet her material is extremely funny. Here's an excerpt from her introduction to *Bird by Bird*, a book about writing *and* life:

*I believed, before I sold my first book, that publication would be instantly and automatically gratifying, an affirming and romantic experience, a Hallmark commercial where one runs and leaps in slow motion across a meadow filled with wildflowers into the arms of acclaim and self-esteem.....The first two (reviews) I got on this tender book I'd written about my dying, now dead father, said that my book was a total waste of time, a boring, sentimental, self-indulgent sack of spider puke. This is not verbatim.*

Lamott's writing is filled with meaning. Not only is the image of leaping into the arms of self-esteem comical, it vividly describes her internal struggle with self worth. Then, the

hilarious “not verbatim” showed her tendency towards exaggerated self criticism when she got the slightest hint of negative feedback. Her humor allows us to gently identify with the pain of her self reflection.

Erma Bombeck distinguished herself as a talented humor writer. However, when she set out to write a book about children with cancer (*I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise*), she had to balance a very serious topic with her usual sarcastic humor. Here’s how she describes her critics’ responses to the project:

*When I said it was a book on children surviving cancer, the expression on their faces changed. Their eyes took on a look of a pain. Their smiles disappeared and their lips formed a firm line. They looked at me with a pity usually reserved for a woman who had just lost her bank card. When I explained that it would reflect humor and optimism, the look changed again – this time to one usually reserved for a woman who had just lost her mind.*

Bombeck later discovers that the children’s stories were full of pain, courage *and* humor. She affirmed the power of laughter to bridge those experiences.

Written humor can entertain; it can illustrate; it can connect with the reader; it can ease the pain of discomfort; and it can balance out the serious information in a way that makes the reading process more enjoyable.

Whenever you write, consider how you might integrate humor so that your readers will be more engaged *and* entertained.

## **HUMOR IN REAL LIFE**

### **A Testimony to Written Humor**

In October, I spoke for the Hospice Association of Oklahoma. I delivered the opening general session on humor and a breakout session on humor and leadership.

As is my practice, I requested a letter of recommendation from the conference coordinator, Melody Lahann. Little did I know that my message of using humor would come full circle through the wonderfully creative letter of reference she wrote. Here it is:

The Hospice Association of Oklahoma (HAO) would NOT recommend Ron Culberson as a speaker because:

- It hurt our backs lifting people from the floor when they fell from their chairs laughing.
- Our HAO board meetings are now entirely too much fun. We all attended both his Humor and Leadership sessions.
- His suggestions were too easy to implement.
- So many positive evaluations were turned in, we got overwhelmed processing them. Plus – several people returned the evaluations to us in the shapes of paper airplanes!
- Attendees report that they were able to use the communication tools he provided immediately – we thought good things come to those who wait!
- We got tired of hearing participants thank us for bringing him to town.
- We work for hospice so we shouldn't see humor in our work (if you haven't worked in hospice, you won't understand this comment).
- Since I've been adopting his suggestions, I might lose my reputation as a "worry wart".

Melody Lahan, M.S., HAO Conference Chair

P.S. Call Ron NOW. You need him!

Editor's Note: I thank Melody for this great illustration of using humor in written materials. This is by far the most fun recommendation I have ever gotten.

## **JUST HUMOR**

Some of my favorite "written" examples of humor:

On the bumper of a florist's van: "Caution: Fragrant Stops"

Under the clock in a college classroom: "Time will pass. Will you?"

On a church marquee: "Our Sundays are better than Baskin Robbins'."

In the window of travel agency: "If you look like your passport photo, you *need* a trip"

## **HUMOR RESOURCES**

"Humor Me", by Ronald P. Culberson is a monthly column in the Observer Newspapers. To read these columns go to our website at [www.FUNsulting.com](http://www.FUNsulting.com) and click "Articles".

*Is Your Glass Laugh Full?* By Ronald P. Culberson (2004)

Books by Bill Bryson: *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003), *In a Sunburned Country* (2000), *A Walk in the Woods* (1998), *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* (1999), *Notes From a Small Island* (1995), *Mother Tongue* (1990), *The Lost Continent* (1989)

Books by Anne Lamott: *Traveling Mercies* (1999), *Bird by Bird* (1994), *Operating Instructions* (1994).

Books by Erma Bombeck: *Eat Less Cottage Cheese And More Ice Cream Thoughts On Life From Erma Bombeck* (2003), *I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise* (1990)

## **HUMOR AT WORK**

### ***Humorizing Your Own Written Material***

Even though you may not be a writer or humorist, there are a number of ways to *funny up* your written material. If the goal is for someone to read your material, the more fun it is, the greater the chances it will be read. Here are a few ways to make your material more humorous:

#### Letters, Emails or Memos

Each of the formal parts of a letter (Address, Salutation, Body, Closing and Signature) is an opportunity for humor.

- Mary, a friend of mine, worked at the Holy Cloud Indian Reservation school. Another friend Jeannette sent her a letter addressed to “Holy Cloud Batman Indian Reservation”. Mary loved it.
- The salutation can be fun to play with as well. Consider writing “Deer Bob” to that hunter in the family or when communicating with your fellow board members, you can open with “Dear Bored”.
- In the body of your notes you can include humor via jokes, quotes or stories. We’ve all been inundated with lengthy forwarded funny emails so don’t overdo it. Remember the intent is to encourage the reader to read everything.
- Closing a letter or email sends a message about the tone of the note. Sincerely is very different than Fondly. I use “FUNcerely” because it reinforces the focus of my work. You might also consider a phrase from Dear Abby like “Sleepless in Seattle” or “Overworked and Underpaid”.
- The signature line includes your name and title. If you don’t have a title, make one up. I am the owner of my company but don’t particularly like President or

- CEO since I *am* the entire company! So, I chose “Director of Everything!” because it captures the job and my style. I’ve also seen these titles: Chief Energizing Officer, Director of First Impressions and Director of Mischief.
- Finally, including a funny quote after your name on an email is a fun way to send a message without distracting from the content.

### Formal Documents

I must confess that I never read my house contract. Legal documents are known for their technical jargon which most people don’t understand. Think how much more enjoyable it would be to read a funny formal document.

- My speaking contract is called a “Program HA-Greement” instead of a Program Agreement”. Since my programs are about humor, this makes me laugh. Unfortunately, procurement officers don’t always get it. That makes me laugh too!
- My contract also includes a copyright condition that states, “If materials are copied without permission, Client risks the wrath of FUNsulting, etc. which may include *lightening*, side splitting or milk through your nose.” It may not hold up in court but the message gets across.
- A meeting agenda is another area that could use some fun. Consider fun titles for routine tasks such as:
  - “Approval of the Minutes Hours”
  - “Bored Report”
  - “FUNancial Report”
  - “Brake” instead of “break” since you’re *stopping* the meeting
  - “Old Business, New Business and None of Your Business”

### Signs

A funny sign will always make you smile. Here are some ideas for *humorizing* the signs in your workplace:

- One hospital had a sign on the door of the maternity unit which said, “Push, Push, Push”
- A common sign in the waiting areas of a veterinarians says, “Sit, Stay”
- For directional signs consider: ← Stay Lost Exit →
- On your office door: “Back In 5 Minutes (Of course my watch is broken)”
- For maps: “You Are Not Here”
- On a counter: “Ring Bell if We Are Totally Ignoring You”

Sometimes we read to be informed. Sometimes we read because we have to. Sometimes we read for pleasure. The more we include humor in our written material, the more often we’ll read for pleasure.

**QUOTE:** There's nothing like a gleam of humor to reassure you that a fellow human being is ticking inside a strange face. Eva Hoffman, author

## **HUMOR ME**

Ronald P. (Ron) Culberson, Director of Everything! at FUNsulting, etc., is a speaker, humorist, author of *Is Your Glass **Laugh** Full?* and former hospice social worker whose mission is to work with organizations that want their people to lighten up by using humor to minimize stress and maximize effectiveness. He is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP), the highest earned award from the National Speakers Association, and is one of less than 7% of speakers worldwide who have received this designation. He has provided entertaining and informative programs to over 70,000 people in more than 600 associations, government agencies, non-profit organizations and *Fortune 500* companies.

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## **BACK QUOTE**

Imagination was given to man to compensate him for what he isn't. A sense of humor was provided to console him for what he is. – Horace Walpole, English writer