



Sample Activity:
The Comedy Ladder

from the Pre-AP workshop

Pre-AP[®]: Strategies in English –
Comedy and Tragedy: Balancing the
Classroom

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Pre-AP: Strategies in English – Comedy and Tragedy: Balancing the Classroom Sample Activity

The Comedy Ladder

Overview of Different Types of Comedy

Few comedies are one purely distinct form or another, but rather they include a blend of types. Some mix farce with low comedy and then lurch toward comedy of ideas and back toward comedy of manners. Some television shows and films rely primarily on one type of comedy, but use the others to a lesser degree. Here are some rough categories that can sometimes help focus discussions.

Low Comedy

At the bottom of the comedy ladder the laughter is longest and loudest over the dirty joke or dirty gesture. At this depth, comedy finds the lowest common denominator: the body. Typically, this is the rung of humor in which bodily functions remind us we are "a little less than the angels." Physical mishaps, pratfalls, slapstick, and loud collisions are the obvious elements. Here too are the long noses, crossed eyes, and dwarfs. Most of us remember *The Three Stooges* -- add sexual antics to that mix and you have adult low comedy. *Beavis and Butthead*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Roxanne*, *Young Frankenstein* -- the examples here are endless.

Farce

The devices that drive the plot identify this form of comedy: mistaken identities, coincidences, and mistimings. The characters become puppets of fate, controlled by action over which they seem to have little control. In farce, characters interested in each other must often struggle to be together as others contrive to keep them apart. There are always coincidences, doublings, or obstacles -- such as twins, busybody parents, unhappy engagements, and marriages that happen at just the wrong time. Money and class figure prominently in the action. *Maid in Manhattan*, *Twins*, *Austin Powers*, and *Big Business* are farcical films, while *Seinfeld*, *Golden Girls* and *That '70s Show* are typical television farces.

Comedy of Manners

Sometimes defined as "the amorous intrigues of the aristocratic classes," this form of comedy emphasizes the mechanisms of language and reduces life and its problems to verbal repartee. Clever insults, put-downs, puns, paradoxes, and epigrams are all types of witticism this comedy uses. Comedy of manners does not hesitate to sacrifice a character's sensitivity to the cause of witty dialogue. Television programs like *Cheers*, *Frasier*, and *Will and Grace* have upper-class characters who fall in and out of love while other characters comment wryly on the action. Often there are three different groups of characters: the true wits, who know themselves; the would-be wits, who trade barbed insults but are not insightful characters; and the witless, who are unaware of, and unfazed by, the true meaning of the lives around them. In *Frasier*, for example, the father and Daphne are the

true wits, Frasier and his brother are would-be wits, and the mirthless radio station manager is witless.

Comedy of Ideas

On this level of comedy the characters argue about important issues like war, gender, marriage, religion, class, and government. The various characters represent different approaches to these issues, pitting their wits (or lack of them) against the wits of those who view reality differently. Satire focuses on the foolish ideas behind an issue and ridicules the thinking and approach to the debate. Satire is a type of comedy of ideas: it is often irreverent and challenges the conventional thinking on issues. *M*A*S*H*, *Monty Python*, George Bernard Shaw's plays and, occasionally, *The Simpsons* explore serious ideas humorously.

Workshop Activity: The Comedy Ladder

In groups, discuss the four rungs of the comedy ladder and provide specific examples of each type of comedy as found in television shows, films, or literature. Present your examples to the group, with each member presenting one of the rungs of the comedy ladder. Suggest appropriate titles from each comedy type for use at the various grade levels. Remember, many times comedy types are combined in entertainment; try to choose examples that clearly show the characteristics of one type of comedy.

1. Type of comedy:
2. Examples of this comedy type found in television, films, and books:
3. Titles appropriate at your grade level for this kind of comedy: