



# University of New Haven

COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

---

Program of Philosophy

PHIL 4450, Section 01  
Philosophy of Humor  
Spring 2019  
M/W from 1:40-2:55  
112 Echlin Hall  
3 Credit Hours

Dr. Douglas Ficek  
Visiting Assistant Professor  
210-5 Kaplan Hall  
203-932-1177 (Office)  
DFicek@newhaven.edu  
Office Hours: Tuesdays from 10:00 to 3:00

## COURSE SYLLABUS

### Course Description

Humor is part of the human condition, which is to say that wherever there are people, there is humor and laughter of some sort. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of humor has not received as much attention as other aspects of the human condition. This is strange, not only because it is a universal phenomenon begging for examination, but also because humor and laughter are kind of strange themselves. What, after all, is humor? And why do we laugh? These are interesting questions, and these days more people are taking them seriously – well, *kind of* seriously.

In this course, we will explore the several different theories of humor, looking at some of the foundational texts. We will also examine the joke, a unique form of humor that we probably encounter daily. We will then consider the art of stand-up comedy and its critical relation to our larger society. Finally, we will consider some of the ethical and political issues in humor – issues that are being debated today.

### Required Texts

Most of the required readings for this course are available as PDFs on my professional website: [www.douglasficek.com/teaching/phil-4450-humor](http://www.douglasficek.com/teaching/phil-4450-humor). Download them, *print them out*, and always bring them with you to class. You cannot participate fully without them, and your attendance grade will suffer if you are consistently unprepared.

*Seriously, bring hard copies. I do not want people on their computers, tablets, or phones during class.*

You also need these two books:

- *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* by Ted Cohen (ISBN: 0226112314)
- *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* by Paul Lewis (ISBN: 0226476995)

### Course Objectives

- Students will learn (and hopefully appreciate) what it means to do philosophy.
- Students will discover new (and possibly profound) concepts, ideas, and theories.
- Students will become better arguers (in the sense making and evaluating arguments).

## Student Learning Outcomes

- Students will be able to explain course readings in reading responses and papers.
- Students will be able to evaluate course readings in reading responses and papers.
- Students will be able to develop critical arguments in reading responses and papers.

## Course Requirements

Attendance is required for this course, and I expect you to be prepared, which means that you need to print out the appropriate texts, read them carefully, and *bring them with you* for class discussion.

To encourage your preparedness, I will give you several pop quizzes throughout the semester, on which you may use your notes, but not the text itself. These will be given at the beginning of class, *so do not make lateness a habit*.

I am also assigning two papers, both 6-8 double-spaced pages in length. These will be based on the course readings, so look through them and begin thinking about the philosophical issues or problems that interest you the most, *not the ones that seem easiest*.

Finally, you will be expected to complete a final project. This might be another paper, a review essay, or perhaps some kind of multimedia project. It will count for 30% of your final grade, so begin thinking about humor and *what specifically* interests you about it.

## Expectations

This course will require significant in-class and out-of-class commitment from each student. The University estimates that a student should expect to spend two hours outside of class for each hour they are in a class.

## Grading

Final grades are based on your attendance, pop quizzes, two papers, and a final project.

|               |      |
|---------------|------|
| Attendance    | 10%  |
| Pop Quizzes   | 20%  |
| First Paper   | 20%  |
| Second Paper  | 20%  |
| Final Project | 30%  |
| Total*        | 100% |

\*Final Grades are assigned with the following scale:

| Undergraduate Scale   |    |              |                   |
|-----------------------|----|--------------|-------------------|
| Grades Scored Between |    |              | Letter Equivalent |
| 97                    | to | 100          | A+                |
| 94                    | to | Less than 97 | A                 |
| 90                    | to | Less than 93 | A-                |
| 87                    | to | Less than 90 | B+                |
| 84                    | to | Less than 87 | B                 |

|    |    |              |    |
|----|----|--------------|----|
| 80 | to | Less than 83 | B- |
| 77 | to | Less than 80 | C+ |
| 74 | to | Less than 77 | C  |
| 70 | to | Less than 73 | C- |
| 67 | to | Less than 70 | D+ |
| 63 | to | Less than 67 | D  |
| 60 | to | Less than 63 | D- |
|    |    | Less than 60 | F  |

## Course Outline/Schedule

- January 23 – Course Introduction

### HUMOR

- January 28 – “A Brief History of Humor Theories” by Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, Jr.
- January 30 – *Philebus* (selections) by Plato, *Poetics* (selections) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections) by Aristotle, and *Leviathan* (selections) and *Human Nature* (selections) by Thomas Hobbes
- February 4 – *Reflections Upon Laughter* (selections) by Francis Hutcheson and *The World As Will and Idea* (selections) by Arthur Schopenhauer
- February 6 – “The Physiology of Laughter” by Herbert Spencer and “Humor” by Sigmund Freud
- February 11 – “A New Theory of Laughter” by John Morreall
- February 13 – “Humor as a Response to Nihilism [with Postscript]” by John Marmysz
- February 18 – “The Epistemology of the Funny” by Liz Sills
- February 20 – Guest: Liz Sills

### JOKES

- February 25 – “On Jokes” by Noël Carroll
- February 27 – *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* by Ted Cohen, pp. 1-45
- March 4 – *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* by Ted Cohen, pp. 45-86

### STAND-UP COMEDY

- March 6 – “Standup Comedy” by Stephanie Koziski Olson
- March 11 – “Twentieth-Century Stand-Up: A History of Charged Critique” by Rebecca Krefting
- March 13 – Film: *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*
- March 18 – SPRING BREAK
- March 20 – SPRING BREAK
- March 25 – “The Comedy of Richard Pryor as Social Satire” by Elsie Griffin Williams
- March 27 – Guest: LeShane Lindsey
- April 1 – “Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique” by Joanne C. Gilbert
- April 3 – Film: *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*

### ETHICS, POLITICS, AND HUMOR

- April 8 – “When Is It Wrong to Laugh?” by Ronald de Sousa
- April 10 – “The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?” by Aaron Smuts

- April 15 – “Gallows Humor in Medicine” by Katie Watson
- April 17 – “An Existentialist Account of the Role of Humor Against Oppression” by Chris A. Kramer
- April 22 – Film: *The Last Laugh*
- April 24 – Film: *The Last Laugh*
- April 29 – *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* by Paul Lewis, pp. 1-107
- May 1 – *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* by Paul Lewis, pp. 109-199
- May 6 – Videos: Stephen Colbert at WHCA Dinner and Michelle Wolf at WHCA Dinner
- May 13 – FINAL EXAM (11:00-1:00)\*

\* There will not be a final exam, but your final project will be due on this date.

## [2018-2019 Academic Calendar](#)

# UNIVERSITY POLICIES & ACADEMIC REGULATIONS

## Add/Drop Policy

January 30, 2019 is the final day to drop this course so that it does not appear on your transcript. After the first week of class, self-service registration will not be enabled for students to directly add or drop classes. Students should contact the registrar’s office directly or the Academic Success Center for assistance with adding and dropping courses during this time.

## Attendance Policies

Students are expected to attend regularly and promptly all their classes, appointments, and exercises. The instructor has the right to dismiss from class any student who has been absent more than two weeks (pro-rated for terms different from that of the semester). A dismissed student will receive a withdrawal (W) from the course if they are still eligible for a withdrawal per the university “Withdrawal from a Course” policy, or a failure (F) if not.

## Religious Observance Policy for Students

The University of New Haven respects the right of its students to observe religious holidays that may necessitate their absence from class or from other required University-sponsored activities. Students who wish to observe such holidays should not be penalized for their absence although, in academic courses, they are responsible for making up missed work. Instructors should try to avoid scheduling exams or quizzes on religious holidays, but where such conflicts occur, should provide reasonable accommodations for missed assignment deadlines or exams. If a class, an assignment due date, or exam interferes with the observance of such a religious holiday, it is the student’s responsibility to notify his or her instructor, preferably at the beginning of the term, but otherwise at least two weeks before the holiday. In a similar vein, students who will not participate in other required activities due to religious observance should notify the staff or faculty member who oversees the program with the same lead-time.

## Withdrawal from a Course

April 2, 2019 (February 19, 2019 for Mini-Term 1) is the final date to request a withdrawal for this term. Students wishing to withdraw from a course must officially do so by completing the [online](#) form or by submitting a [course withdrawal form](#) to the registrar’s office. This request must be submitted to the Office of the University Registrar (and signed by the International

Services Office if you are an international student). The grade of W will be recorded, but the course will not affect the GPA.

### **Academic Integrity Policy and Procedures**

To know what is expected of them, students are responsible for reading and understanding the statement regarding academic honesty in the [Student Handbook](#). Please ask me about my expectations regarding permissible or encouraged forms of student collaboration if there is any confusion about this topic.

The [Dean of Students Office](#) offers a range of support to students. It answers questions, provides information about and referrals to campus resources; assists in students' adjustment to the University; promotes programs which address student needs, concerns and interests; and helps students in resolving problems of any type.

### **Commitment to Positive Learning Environment**

The University adheres to the philosophy that all community members should enjoy an environment free of any form of harassment, sexual misconduct, discrimination, or intimate partner violence. If you have been the victim of sexual misconduct, we encourage you to report this. If you report this to a faculty/staff member, they must notify our college's Title IX coordinator about the basic facts of the incident (you may choose to request confidentiality from the University). If you encounter sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, sexual assault, or discrimination based on race, color, religion, age, national origin, ancestry, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability please contact the Title IX Coordinator, Caroline Koziatek, at (203) 932.7479 or [ckoziatek@newhaven.edu](mailto:ckoziatek@newhaven.edu). For more information visit [Title IX at the University of New Haven](#).

### **Reporting Bias Incidents**

At the University of New Haven, there is an expectation that all community members are committed to creating and supporting a climate which promotes civility, mutual respect, and open-mindedness. There also exists an understanding that with the freedom of expression comes the responsibility to support community members' right to live and work in an environment free from harassment and fear. It is expected that all members of the University community will engage in anti-bias behavior and refrain from actions that intimidate, humiliate, or demean persons or groups or that undermine their security or self-esteem. ([Reporting Options](#))

## **UNIVERSITY SUPPORT SERVICES**

The University recognizes that students can often use some help outside of class and offers academic assistance through several offices.

### **Centers for Academic Success and Advising (CASA)**

The Centers for Academic Success and Advising is comprised of the following offices:

#### **Center for Student Success (CSS)**

The Center for Student Success (CSS), located in Maxcy 106, provides academic support to students, including success strategies, registration assistance, degree audit guidance,

and study and time-management skills. CSS staff work with students to connect them to campus resources, navigate processes, and assist in resolving issues as they arise. The CSS is also maintains the Starfish Early Alert system and provides students with progress reports from their instructors.

### **Center for Learning Resources (CLR)**

The Center for Learning Resources (CLR), located in the Peterson Library, provides academic content support to graduate and undergraduate students using metacognitive strategies that help students become aware of and learn to apply optimal learning processes in the pursuit of creating independent learners. CLR tutors focus sessions on discussions of concepts and processes and typically use external examples to help students grasp and apply the material.

### **Starfish Early Alert System**

*The University of New Haven utilizes the Starfish Early Alert system. Starfish is designed to promote student success by coordinating communication between students, instructors and support staff. Throughout the semester, you may receive emails regarding your academic progress. You will also be contacted by the Center for Student Success to discuss any concerns and develop a plan for success. It is important that you check your university email regularly and take the recommended actions. Learn more about Starfish here:*

<https://mycharger.newhaven.edu/web/mycharger/for-students>

### **University Writing Center**

The mission of the Writing Center (an expansion of the Writer to Writer peer-tutoring program) is to provide high-quality tutoring to undergraduate and graduate students as they write for a wide range of purposes and audiences. Tutors are undergraduate and graduate students studying Biology, Communications, Criminal Justice, National Security, Engineering, English, Environmental Science, Finance, Forensic Science, Legal Studies, Marine Biology, Music, Nutrition, and Psychology. We are here to work with you at any stage in the writing process; just bring in your assignment, your ideas, and any writing you've done so far. To make an appointment, you can register for an account with our scheduling site at <https://newhaven.mywconline.com> or visit us in person at our desk on the first floor of Peterson library (just to the left after you enter the library).

### **Accessibility Resources Center**

Students with disabilities are encouraged to share, in confidence, information about needed specific course accommodations. The Accessibility Resources Center, located in Sheffield Hall, is responsible for and committed to providing services and support that serve to promote educational equity and ensure that students are able to participate in the opportunities available at the University of New Haven. Accommodations cannot be made without written documentation from the Accessibility Resources Center.

### **Counseling & Psychological Services**

The Counseling Center offers a variety of services aimed at helping students resolve personal difficulties and acquire the balance, skills, and knowledge that will enable them to take full advantage of their experience at the University of New Haven.