

Laugh and Learn
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Overview

This unit is written for a fifth grade English class. It could probably be adapted for classes that are slightly older or younger. It may also be useful for reading or social studies classes. The unit will briefly address the history of comedy, but the emphasis will be on the comedy that is popular with the students of today. Several forms of written and visual comedy will be included. The students will be encouraged to recognize and perform various forms of comedy. These will include jokes, limericks, parodies, riddles,

cartoons and short skits. Through the use of videotape, the students will become acquainted with some of the famous comics of the twentieth century. Each student will write a personal narrative about the funniest thing that ever happened to him/her or the funniest person that he/she knows. In addition, each student will research a famous comedian or comic author. Also, each student will present a book report about one of the funny books that he/she read. An alternative might be to review a funny movie or television show. Finally, everyone will be encouraged to make a comic mask or clown costume. The culminating event will be a talent show. The students may work singly or in groups. The unit will last nine weeks, which is one grading period.

Rationale

I have chosen to develop the unit Laugh and Learn for many reasons. The most important being, as my mother or some other famous person once said, "If you can't beat em, join em." During these highly technological times more and more demands are being made on teachers and students. I feel that comedy lightens the mood of the room for everyone. Looking at the funny side of things makes the many required fifth grade tasks less overwhelming. I plan to capitalize on the sense of humor of my fifth graders, who are all budding comedians. They particularly love jokes, riddles, slapstick and other types of visual humor. Since I'm the teacher, I feel that I should have some control over the kinds of humor that permeates the room. My goal would be to expand my students' knowledge of the various forms of comedy popular today and go briefly into the history of comedy that was popular during previous eras. The students should be able to compare and contrast past and current forms of comedy, and identify their favorite form.

As a part of our Standards Based Portfolios, we are required to include two responses to information, two personal narratives, a response to literature, and a report of information. We are also required to read twenty-five books by at least four different authors and in at least four different genres. It is also acceptable to include magazine and newspaper articles. If a student chose to use to read a joke book that would be fine. One might also choose some of Edward Lear's popular limericks or Ogden Nash's comic poetry. The idea is to get them reading rather than spending hours watching television. If they are going to watch TV, anyhow, why not watch it with a more critical eye as they view some of the suggested sitcoms or comedy shows.

Objectives

1. The student will be able to do independent research using the library and the computer. I will insist on at least three sources for any written or oral report.
2. The student will write a personal narrative.
3. The student will define various terms that pertain to comedy.

4. The students will compare and contrast various forms of comedy.
5. The students will reach conclusions about, "What is funny?"

Strategies

I will begin the unit as soon as the first student asks, "Do you want to hear a funny joke Mrs. Braun?" Usually this leads to a slew of joke telling which often includes jokes that I myself heard in the fifth grade. The children are always impressed with how many riddles that I actually know the answers to. I will then ask them, "What is funny?" or "What makes you laugh?" I anticipate that several will mention jokes, riddles, or possibly limericks. Some may relate events that happened to them or others, such as the one student who told the tale of when his family's Thanksgiving turkey fell through the crack in the center of the table. He described it such vivid detail that all of us were laughing hysterically. I will make the point that it's funny when the unexpected happens, even something as simple as falling out of a chair or tripping over a bookbag. Others will probably mention some of the antics they've seen on *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, or *I Love Lucy*. (Yes, they're still watching *I Love Lucy*! They all are familiar with the scene of Lucy and Ethel in the chocolate factory.) Perhaps someone who has been to a circus will mention that clowns are funny. If we analyze this further, hopefully we will conclude that funny costumes or dress makes us all laugh as does funny hair or faces. Anyone who wants to entertain the class will invariably put something on their head that doesn't belong there, so incongruity is funny. We have a section on cartoons in our Reading practice books so a student may wish to include them on our list. Fifth grade boys are really good at making weird assortments of noises that that they think are funny. The girls and I may not agree, but I know that some comedians such as Victor Borge used a lot of funny sounds that made people laugh. In our English book we have a section on tall tales which points out that exaggeration is funny. Fifth graders are still amused by Babe and his Blue Ox and Pecos Bill. After we complete our in depth discussion of "What is funny?" we will generate a list of terms to research and define. I would expect them to include: cartoon, clown, comedian, comedy, comic, exaggerate, funny, humor, incongruous, irony, joke, limerick, parody, riddle, sarcasm, satire, and wit. We always generate our lists in alphabetical order.

I will give the students a brief history of comedy in general. Some of the earliest comic writers such as Aristophanes are much too bawdy for the fifth grade, but I do have a copy of Shakespeare's As You Like It that has been adapted for young students which we can perform. I also have a video of Mozart's comic opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, which I will show the class. Both of these works demonstrate the common themes of mistaken identities and marriage celebrations, which are common to many comedies. I will mostly focus on the humor of the twentieth century because this would tie in well with the unit I did in 2001 called Defining Decades with Media Events. In that unit each group

chose several facets of a decade of the twentieth century to research. They also interviewed someone who lived during their decade. It will be easy to add a comedian or funny movie, radio or television show to each person's era. Additional questions for the interview component would be, "Who was your favorite comedian?" or "What was your favorite funny movie, radio or television show?" Throughout the duration of the unit, I will show portions of videos of some of the comic television shows that are available. I also will show some of my favorite movie comedies such as *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. I will also choose one or two Abbott and Costello and Martin and Lewis movies to show. My personal favorite is Woody Allen, but his comedies are a little too sophisticated for fifth grade.

I intend to have the children work in groups. Each person in the group will tell his/her favorite joke, bring in his/her favorite comic strip, and write a personal narrative about the funniest thing that ever happened to him/her, or the funniest person that he/she knows. Each student will also present a book report about one of the funny books that he/she read. As a group, they would design their own group cartoon or comic strip, research a famous comedian, write a tall tale, write a parody to a familiar song, (I happen to have a copy of *"For Swingin' Livers Only!"* the album by Allan Sherman which I will play to help them understand what a parody is.), make up an original limerick, and finally with the assistance of the art teacher create an original comic mask. As a culminating event we will either put on an original play or talent show.

Narrative

Comedy is a form of expression or drama that is intended to amuse. It is associated with humorous behavior and wordplay and laughter. Comedy is the most widely performed of all dramatic genres. Most comedy ends happily. Some comedy such as slapstick is meant to be humorous by ridiculing someone or something. Satire is an even more stinging type of humor that is written to criticize or condemn mankind's foibles or faults. For the fifth grade purposes, I will stick to the funnier kind of comedy.

The first written comedies were staged in Athens, Greece, during the fifth century BC. I was surprised at how easy it was to read and understand Aristophanes (448-385bc). Much of what I read of his seems very apropos in today's world. Many of his characters lampooned the Athenian politics, philosophy and art of the time. In the fourth century BC, Menander (342-291bc), a popular dramatist penned comedies that avoided topical events, but instead created stereotyped characters that were hopelessly foolish. They became involved in cases of mistaken identity and coincidence, which weren't untangled until the end of the play. Menander's basic criteria for comedy was still being used by the Roman playwrights Plautus (254-184) and Terence (190-159) of the second century. They added boisterous characters, bawdy subplots and sharp repartee. Plautus added song and dance to his

comedies. Were these the first musical comedies? Terence emphasized mistaken identities and double plots. During the middle ages (fifth to fifteenth centuries), plays featuring saints and biblical stories became popular. They were performed by local clergy or traveling actors. They all included comic interludes. English playwrights of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries retained the medieval blend of comedy and tragedy along with slapstick routines.

William Shakespeare was the premier playwright of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. He was born on April 23, 1564, and died on April 23, 1616. I am sure that fact will intrigue my class. All of my students have heard of Shakespeare. I actually have one girl who often quotes him in her essays. As I mentioned previously I do have a children's version of As You Like It which was first performed in the late 1590s. My children would be delighted to perform this play.

Ben Jonson (1572-1637), a dramatist known for his hilarious portrayals of contemporary London life, provided a practical theory of comedy, derived from his understanding of human physiology and psychology. According to the medical beliefs of his time, four internal liquids, called humors—blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm—determined the health and mental stability of every individual. When these secretions are in balance, the human body and mind perform in perfect harmony. But when there is an imbalance in the body, the dominant humor creates an overload of temperament, which was seen as the root cause of abnormal behavior and which served, for Jonson, as the origin of comic character. This explanation was known as *the theory of the four humors*. Jonson's comedies demonstrated this theory with his eccentric characters.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an Italian form of improvised comedy known as *commedia dell'arte* became popular. Many of the characters were masked. Harlequin, a predecessor to the clowns of today appeared as one of the most popular white-faced theatrical entertainers. Could *commedia dell'arte* have been the forerunner to the improvised comedy of the Second City Troupe that I saw in Chicago last month?

Moliere (1622-73), the French satirist, became popular in the 1600s as one of the central figures of the Age of Enlightenment. He believed that literature should serve as a vehicle for social change. He had such an effect on French comedy that even today, the French use his lines in their everyday speech without being aware of their source.

The eighteenth century brought a favorite composer of mine, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). He was one of the great musical geniuses of western civilization. He composed more than six hundred pieces of music during his short lifetime. I have an extensive collection of his work that I'm always happy to play for my classes even though they're not always that happy to listen. His comic opera *The Marriage of Figaro* is quite entertaining. I have taken children as young as eight to see it, and they have all enjoyed it. I do have a simplified libretto, the video, and even two coloring books to accompany the opera. The children love when people are running in and out of windows, and the opera ends with several marriages as comedy is wont to do.

Comic writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to a large degree followed the successful formats of their predecessors. However, now we had newer forms of performance comedy such as minstrel shows, vaudeville, burlesque, and musicals. The ancient arts of clowning and physical comedy were revived with up-to-date performances.

Minstrel Shows were a type of theatrical entertainment that originated in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. They consisted of songs, dances, and comic repartee typically performed by white actors made up as blacks. The minstrel show probably evolved from two types of entertainment that were popular in America before 1830: the impersonation of blacks given by white actors between acts of plays or circuses and the performance of black banjo players, who sang in the city streets. The most well known minstrel was Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, who between 1828 and 1831 developed a song-and-dance routine in which he impersonated an old, crippled black slave, dubbed Jim Crow. He had many imitators. Imagine how politically incorrect this would be nowadays. In 1842, in New York City, songwriter Daniel Decatur Emmett and three companions devised a program of singing and dancing in blackface to the accompaniment of bone castanets, violin, banjo, and tambourine. They called themselves the Virginia Minstrels. Another group called the Christy Minstrels, headed by actor Edwin Christy originated many essential features of the minstrel show, including the seating of the entertainers in semicircle on the stage, with a tambourine player on one end and a performer on the bone castanets on the other. They were known as Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones. In the 1850's the typical minstrel show had two parts. The first part include the comic exchange, songs by Tambo and Bones, sentimental ballads by such composers as Stephen Foster, a final song by the whole company, and a walk-around. A walk-around was when, one at a time, each performer walked around the inside of the semi-circle and did his own specialty. The second part consisted of specialty acts such as clog dances, jigs and female impersonators. After the Civil War, black entertainers also performed in minstrel shows. Some say that the banjo playing of minstrel shows influenced the development of ragtime, and that clog dancing evolved into tap dancing. After 1870, the popularity of minstrel shows declined, and by 1919 there were only three troupes left.

Al Jolson was an entertainer who became popular in the early 1900's. I know that he appeared in black face, and was in one of the first talking films. My father, who was a song-and-dance man, appeared in the semicircle of a film with Al Jolson. I know that he was in black face because he often spoke about it. I wish I had more details. I do have some Al Jolsen recordings. He does sing some Stephen Foster songs. He also sings, "*Are You Lonesome Tonight?*" So, move over Elvis. I will play some of Jolson's music for the class. Perhaps one of them will want to choose him to do his/her research about.

Burlesque is a form of comic art characterized by ridiculous exaggeration. The earliest use of burlesque was in plays of Aristophanes, Euripedes, and Plautus. Chaucer brought burlesque to England during the Renaissance. Moliere also excelled in dramatic burlesque. In modern writings, the Nonsense Novels (1911) of Canadian author Stephen Leacock is one of the best examples of light burlesque. In the United States, burlesque began in the 1860s as a combination of the minstrel show and vaudeville. By the first quarter of the twentieth century emphasis was already being placed upon broad, ribald comedy

and scantily clad women. In the 1930s, the striptease became a feature of American burlesque. Gypsy Rose Lee was a popular stripper, and I think that the movie based on her life would be PG enough for my classes to watch. As films and radio became more popular, the popularity of burlesque declined. It had been a good training ground for many comics. These included such performers as Fanny Brice, Bobby Clark, Bert Lahr, Red Skelton, and Phil Silvers.

Vaudeville was a kind of variety show that was popular in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The word vaudeville loosely means “street voices.” In the nineteenth century vaudeville was stage entertainment made up of several individual acts by a single entertainer or a group of entertainers. These included acrobats, family acts, musicians, comedians, jugglers, magicians, trained animals, and so forth. Tony Pastor was one of the first people to present it as respectable entertainment in his Fourteenth Street Theater in New York City. In 1885 Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Franklin Albee entered into a partnership. They managed to acquire control over a chain of vaudeville theaters in almost every major city of the United States. Frederick Francis Proctor joined them in 1905, and vaudeville became the most popular form of American entertainment during the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1928, when vaudeville was at the height of its popularity, an estimated 2 million people daily attended performances given at the approximately 1000 vaudeville theaters of the United States. The Palace Theater in New York City was the leading theater on the vaudeville circuit, and almost every vaudeville performer aspired to appear there. One of those performers of the twenties was my father, a song-and-dance man. His dancing partner was Gene Kelly's sister. Alas, he listened to his mother and never made it to the “Great White Way.” If only my grandma would have had the foresight of Minnie Marx. My grandmother did not want her son to be an entertainer so he became a luggage salesman instead. My sister, my cousins, and I spent many hours putting on vaudeville shows on the front porch. We knew all of my father's routines as well as those of Eddie Cantor and Ted Lewis. Ted Lewis was popular for the expression, “Is everybody happy?” and the song, *Me and My Shadow*. My father would be Ted Lewis and the rest of us were all shadows. It was a lot more fun than playing Gameboy, but I can't get anyone to believe that. Some vaudeville performers, such as Eddie Cantor, W.C. Fields, Will Rogers, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jack Benny, Jimmy Durante, the Marx brothers, Bob Hope, and Fanny Bryce later crossed over to other popular mediums such as radio, film, and even television.

In the early part of the twentieth century, silent motion-picture comedy developed quite naturally. Buster Keaton, a former vaudeville performer was one of the first silent film comics as was Charlie Chaplin. My mother told me how much she enjoyed their movies at the corner nickelodeon. I know that some are available on video, so I will certainly try to rent them to show the children. One of the most popular comedy teams of motion-picture history was Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. They easily made the transition from silent to talking film, and viewers could now hear Hardy's oft-repeated line, “Here's another fine mess you've gotten me into.”

By the 1930s Hollywood, the center of the film industry, had created an internationally recognized style that harked back to the time-tested techniques and comic types of ancient Greece and Rome. There were also comedy shows on the radio. Some popular radio comedians were Fannie Bryce,

Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Edgar Bergen was a ventriloquist, and Charlie was his dummy. I had a Charlie McCarthy doll when I was little. Most of the radio comedians had begun in vaudeville as I mentioned previously. There were also radio sitcoms such as "Amos and Andy," "Life with Luigi," "The Goldbergs," "My Favorite Husband," "Baby Snooks," and many others. I don't really remember any of these. I do know that they made the transition to television in the early fifties. My older friends tell me how much they looked forward to these radio sitcoms.

Hollywood continued to make many comedies during the forties. Cary Grant starred in many of them, and was in my personal favorite, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Abbot and Costello were a favorite comedy team of the period. They were a successful vaudeville act who went on to make a number of films that showcased their routines. My favorite was *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy*.

Following World War II, (1939-45) the United States witnessed the growth of the situation comedy on television, which featured idealized families dealing with everyday problems. Some of the popular radio sitcoms also made the move to television. "I Love Lucy" which starred Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez was the first hit television sitcom. It had been adapted from Lucy's radio show, "My Favorite Husband." There were also TV variety shows such as Ed Sullivan or Steve Allen which featured multiple acts similar to vaudeville. As a matter of fact, many of the performers that I saw on these shows such as Eddie Cantor or Sophie Tucker had been vaudeville performers. One of the most popular TV performers ever was Milton Berle. He's the reason my family purchased a television. My parents were embarrassed every Tuesday when my sister and I went to the neighbor's house to watch TV. In 1954, the first late night talk show with Steve Allen began broadcasting. Jack Paar and Johnny Carson followed him. Jay Leno and David Letterman still have late night shows that emphasize comedy.

The late forties and early fifties brought one of the most popular comedy teams ever, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. Dean was the straight man and Jerry the buffoon. I spent many Saturday afternoons watching Martin and Lewis films. I particularly enjoyed Hollywood or Bust. The pair split up in 1956, and both continued to be successful as single entertainers. As a matter of fact Jerry still performs, and my students recognize him as the man who does the Muscular Dystrophy telethon.

By the sixties a darker form of humor known as back comedy was developing and becoming popular in some urban clubs. These stand-up comedians attacked social mores through shocking language and offensive imagery. Some of these bitterly witty comedians were Dick Gregory, Mort Sahl, George Carlin, and Richard Pryor. I saw Dick Gregory perform in New York before he became an activist. He was quite funny and to the point. I have recordings of Carlin and Pryor, but they are totally unsuitable to play for fifth graders. Situation comedies became more realistic in the sixties and seventies with shows like "All in the Family" and "Maude." The seventies also brought us unique comedy shows such as "Laugh-in" and "Saturday Night Live." "In the 80s and 90s, "The Cosby Show," "Cheers," "Seinfeld" and "Frasier" became shows that no one wanted to miss. By this time network censorship had diminished and some television shows such as "The Simpsons," and "South Park" have become very irreverent. Some popular comedians of the 80s and 90s were and are

Roseanne, Joan Rivers, Jerry Seinfeld, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams, and Bill Cosby and Eddie Murphy.

Classroom Activities

Activity 1 Introduction and Definitions

As I mentioned previously, I will begin the unit when the first student asks if I want to hear a joke. We will then brainstorm about what comedy actually is and generate a list of words that pertain to comedy. As also previously mentioned, those words would include: cartoon, clown, comedian, comedy, comic, exaggerate, funny, humor, incongruous, irony, joke, limerick, parody, riddle, sarcasm, satire, and wit. The students' first assignment would be to look up the definitions of the above words. I will then give an overview of the history of comedy as written in the narrative portion of this unit. I expect this portion of the unit to take three of four 45-minute periods.

Activity 2 Writing a Personal Narrative

The students will write a personal narrative either about the funniest person that they know or the funniest thing that ever happened to them. We will follow the approved writing process of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, which includes the following steps:

- 1 prewriting or brainstorming
- 2 rough draft
- 3 proofread
- 4 revise
- 5 publish

We also follow the standard expository form of a good beginning, supporting details, and a satisfying conclusion. My models of personal narratives are as follows:

Funny Mummy

My mother was the funniest person I know. I don't know if she meant to be funny, but so many things she did ended up being comical. She had a humorous event for each season.

One winter, she decided that it was far too time consuming to shovel snow. I'm sure the fact that we had two flights of steps covered with snow, had something to do with that. Her method of snow removal was to pour boiling water down the steps. The snow did seem to magically disappear. However, the next morning I was leaving the house to go to school and I slid down the steps which were now covered by a thin layer of ice. Luckily I wasn't severely injured, and I just chalked up to another of my mother's misadventures.

In the spring, my mother would fill the front yard with plastic tulips. From far away, they looked quite real. My mother would of course place them in the garden much earlier than tulips should actually bloom, and leave them there well after everyone else's had died. My mother loved it when someone would say, "Marge, how did you get your tulips to bloom so early?" or Marge, how'd you get your tulips to last so long?" My sister and I would smile knowingly as my mother proclaimed, "I guess I just have a green thumb."

Summer was barbecue time at our house. My mother would invite friends over for dinner. She'd light up the grill, and glibly ask, "Do you want steaks or hamburgers?" I knew that we didn't have a steak in the house, but that didn't phase my mother. She knew that people would be too embarrassed to ask for steak. It worked every time.

One fall evening, I brought my future husband home for dinner for the first time. My mother thought she would impress him with her culinary skills. The first course was shrimp cocktail. The shrimp seemed quite squishy and watery. I never said a word, but I realized that my mother took what she thought were cooked shrimp out of the freezer and served them raw. The salad course was uneventful. Then my mother brought out the piece de resistance, a standing rib roast on an impressive looking platter. Suddenly she dropped the whole thing on the floor. I thought, "Oh no, the evening's a disaster!" My mother didn't bat an eye. She said, "Oh my, I'll go get the other roast out of the kitchen." Of course, she returned with the same roast. My husband ate it and enjoyed it. I didn't tell him what had really happened till many years later.

My mother maintained that having a sense of humor helped her get through both the good and bad times of life. I do know that it would be impossible to teach fifth grade without some comic relief. I guess I am my mother's daughter after all.

Going Up?

The funniest thing that ever happened to me was when my mother-in-law fell on the escalator at the old Greater Pittsburgh Airport. My mother-in-law had just arrived from visiting her son Ben in Chicago. My husband, two small children, and I had gone to pick her up. We went downstairs to retrieve her luggage, and were heading toward the escalator, which at that time carried one back up to the parking lot. My husband ran ahead (as he was wont to do) and left me with the two children and my

mother-in-law. My mother-in-law was less than five feet tall. She had short legs, and walked in short little steps. I had my two-year-old daughter in my left hand. In my right hand, I was carrying an umbrella and a small suitcase. My son Stuart, age four, stepped on the escalator first. My mother-in-law was right behind him. My daughter and I stepped on next. Suddenly my mother-in-law began to fall backwards. I couldn't catch her because my hands were full. However, I could break her fall. She ended up laying flat on her back with her short little legs pointed in opposite directions. The escalator was still proceeding upward. My son started to cry because he figured he would be blamed. I kept screaming "Stop the escalator! Stop the escalator!" as I tried to stifle a laugh. I could imagine how funny this whole scene must have looked to the people on the floor above who were watching this little old lady ride the escalator upside down. Luckily some airport officials did hear my shouts and stopped the escalator. They were able to help my mother-in-law get up and every thing turned out right.

Activity 3 Research Paper

The students will write a research paper about one of the people listed in the appendix who pertain to comedy. They will follow the approved process for writing a research report:

- 1 Choose a topic
- 2 Take notes from at least three sources. These may be library books or computer sites.
- 3 Make an outline.
- 4 Write the rough draft.
- 5 Revise.
- 6 Publish.

My research model is as follows:

George Burns

George Burns has been one of favorite comedians since I was a child. He was born Nathan Birnbaum in 1896 in New York City. He began his career as a vaudeville dancer, but soon switched his specialty to comedy acts. He met his wife Gracie Allen in the early 1920s. They formed their comedy team in 1923, and married in 1926. They performed together for thirty-five years in all mediums of show business. You can still see some of the more than a dozen motion pictures they made on the networks that specialize in old movies. In 1930, they made their radio debut. They moved to television in 1950. That's when I first saw them. I loved the TV show, especially the part at the end when George would say to Gracie, "Say good night Gracie." And Gracie would say, "Good night Gracie."

Gracie left the act in 1958, but George continued working in television, theater, and nightclubs. I remember seeing him on talk or variety shows where he would begin to sing a song and never complete it. Finally he made an album with his hit song, *I Wish Was Eighteen Again*. I own that album, and still enjoy listening to it. In 1975, Burns returned to the movies taking over a role in *The Sunshine Boys* when Jack Benny died. He won an academy award for that role, and went on to make several more films.

In 1996 George Burns died, even though he had been booked to play the Palladium in London. I always enjoyed his kind of humor, and he actually gave me some advice that I use today. He said, that when Gracie died, he moved to her side of the bed thus making the loss less difficult. I did the same thing when my husband died, and it helped me too.

Activity 4 Writing a Limerick

I would begin this activity by defining a limerick. A limerick is a humorous verse form, the subject of which is often nonsensical but the structure of which is strictly prescribed. The pattern consists of five lines. Lines one, two, and five contain three metrical feet, and rhyme. Lines three and four contain two metrical feet, and rhyme. Originally, limericks were delivered orally and served as commentaries on manners and behavior. The most famous of all limerick writers was the English painter and humorist Edward Lear. The following, from his Book of Nonsense (1846), illustrates the genre:

There was an Old Man of the Coast

Who placidly sat on a post;

But when it was cold,

He relinquished his hold,

And called for some hot buttered toast.

The term limerick (from a refrain in a popular song of the day) was first applied in the late 1890s to Lear's verse. I'm sure the children will have a lot of fun working on these. I would have them do this activity in small groups.

Activity 5 Writing a Parody

I have always enjoyed writing parodies myself, so I would also have groups of children write parodies. A parody is a comic imitation of a piece of writing. It is often done to familiar songs. You pick a song that has a simple melody, choose a topic you want to write about and change the words. That is the form that I am most familiar with so I will have my class write theirs in that form. To demonstrate the form I will play *For Swingin Livers Only* by Allan Sherman. A short segment of "Pop Hates the Beatles" as sung to the tune of "Pop Goes the Weasel" is as follows:

My daughter needs a new phonograph.

She wore out all the needles.

Besides I broke the old one in half.

I hate the Beatles!

Activity 6 Creating a Cartoon

All of the children in my class are familiar with a variety of types of cartoons because there is a lesson on cartoons in our reading practice book. I know the groups would enjoy creating their own cartoons. It is a good way to capitalize on the talents of those children who can draw well.

Cartoons are humorous, satirical or opinionated drawings. They may or may not have short texts or captions and are often found in newspapers or magazines. The word cartoon is derived from the Italian word cartoni. During the Renaissance (14th to 17th centuries) in Italy, it was a custom to decorate wall surfaces with large murals known as frescoes. The cartoni were drawings that were transferred to the walls. The meaning of the word cartoon changed in the 1840s when Prince Albert wanted to decorate the new Houses of Parliament in London with frescoes. He opened a competition for their design, and some of the cartoons were quite absurd and were parodied in the English magazine *Punch*. The word cartoni became cartoon with the definition as stated above. The panel, a single drawing contained within a box-shaped outline, is the fundamental building block of all modern cartoons. Most cartoons fall into one of several different categories: editorial, gag, illustrative, comic strips, and animated.

Editorial cartoons, sometimes referred to as political cartoons serve as a visual commentary on current events. They are usually satirical in nature. They often use caricature, a deliberate distortion of exaggeration of person's features, to make fun of well-know figures. In the classroom caricatures are often used to make fun of the teacher, so I'm sure my classes will have no trouble understanding

these. Cartoons are often used to sway public opinion. This concept of persuasion is one of the communication standards.

Gag cartoons usually consist of a single panel accompanied by a caption. They are often found in magazines or even on greeting cards.

Illustrative cartoons are used in conjunction with advertising or learning materials. We have recently learned to prepare brochures on the computer. I'm sure the use of a cartoon would enhance the product that the student was writing about. A good example of an illustrative cartoon character used in advertising would be the Jolly Green Giant.

A comic strip is a sequence of cartoons that tells a story. Dialogue is usually present in balloons, as encircled words issuing from a character's mouth within the panels of the cartoon. Comic strips may be a single episode such as "Peanuts" or a continuing story such as "Mary Worth." One of my fondest memories of my father is of him reading "Nancy and Sluggo" to me. Comic strips are commonly found in newspapers today. The first one appeared in a United States newspaper in 1904. They were originally placed in the papers to increase sales.

Animation is the process of recording a series of incremental drawings and then playing it back to create the illusion of continuous motion. It is easy to demonstrate this process with the use of flipbooks. We learned to make these at the Children's Museum and it is always a fun activity. Animated cartoons were once very popular in the theaters, and are now a staple of Saturday morning television. Some of my more talented students may choose to make an animated cartoon with the use of video recorder.

Activity 7 Creating a Mask or Clown Face

Since every fifth grade classroom has at least one class clown, I would be remiss if I did not include an activity about clowns. Every year the art teacher goes into the history of masks and has each student make a mask. Masks have been used in the theater since the days of Ancient Greece. They were worn by players in the Italian theater form known as commedia dell'arte in the 16th century. They were designed to add to the exaggeration of the comic characters. Of course, there are the standard comedy and tragedy masks that represent the theater. I will give the student the option of either designing his own unique mask or clown face.

A clown is a performer, usually in a circus, who plays the fool, performs practical jokes, and does tricks to make people laugh. I actually have several clowns in training in the room. Although there are many types of clowns, each clown develops a *face*, meaning a performance personality. A clown's face, once established, becomes the clown's personal property. Faces and styles of circus clowns originally developed from specific performers and their routines. Most clowns fall into four basic categories: whiteface, auguste, character, and new vaudeville.

The oldest type of clown is the whiteface, which dates back to the 18th century. The white color of the face was originally achieved with flour. White lead was later used, but after the 1880s, when lead was discovered to be toxic, greasepaint began to be used. It is still used today. The whiteface clown evolved from earlier whiteface theatrical entertainers. One of the most popular whiteface characters in history is Harlequin, a comic personality in the Italian Theater. By the early 19th century the clown was gaining in popularity over the Harlequin. Grimaldi was one of the most popular clowns of all time. He appeared in London. His makeup consisted of exaggerated eyebrows, geometrical patterns on his cheeks applied over the white base, and a blue topknot on his bald head. Many subsequent clowns became jugglers, acrobats or mimes. They all tended to be mischievous. Some modern whitefaces, however, are often characterized as sad.

Another type of clown is the auguste, which developed in the mid-19th century. The auguste clown usually wears oversize shoes, a bulbous red nose, wigs of bright colors, and mismatched, oversized clothing. He may leave most of his natural skin color showing or use a pink or red makeup base instead of white. Facial features are painted on in black and red. The lower lip and eyes may be outlined in white to exaggerate facial expressions. The auguste clown stumbles, performs pratfalls, slaps and is slapped, and often is the butt of jokes. Two of the most famous auguste clowns would be Bozo and Ronald McDonald. The word auguste comes from the German word *august*, which means stupid bumbling fool.

In the early 20th century a third category of clown developed. These were known as character clowns. They performed short, solo routines between circus acts, and worked alone. Character clowns make fun of different features of the human face through exaggeration, including beards, whiskers, warts, large noses, bald heads, and strange haircuts. The most popular character is the hobo or tramp clown. The best-known tramp clown ever was Emmett Kelly. Red Skelton developed some of his characters such as Clem Kadiddlemopper based on the character clown.

New vaudeville clowns are modern performers who have turned away from traditional clown acts. Usually, the new vaudevillian clown works alone, typically without makeup. He seeks to relate with audience members rather than perform for them. Some perform with circuses, while others make their mark in the theater. An example of the new vaudeville performers would be the Flying Karamazov Brothers, a group of four musical jugglers.

Clowning techniques are primarily taught in specialized clown schools. My children don't believe me when I tell them that there is actually a clown college in Sarasota, Florida. It is the Barnum & Bailey

Clown College that opened in 1968 and has graduated more than 1200 students. We are now taking up a collection to provide tuition for Steven O'Shell, a famous fifth grade clown.

Activity 8 Performing *As You Like It*

Fifth graders love to perform, and we usually put on one or two plays a year. I feel that after learning about the history of comedy and identifying some of the common elements of comedy, it would be fun to put on a play by Shakespeare. I have chosen *As You Like It*, mainly because I was able to obtain a children's version. It also has a lot of characters so there would be parts for everyone who wanted one. It has some of the comic themes of Shakespeare's time including women disguising themselves as men and multiple marriage ceremonies at the end of the play. Very briefly, the plot of the play concerns an exiled duke and love-struck teens roaming through the forest. It was first performed in the late 1590s. Before we begin our rehearsals, I would have the class view the 20th century production featuring Cloris Leachman and Katharine Hepburn so they could become familiar with the speech patterns and story line. I would also provide a brief background of the life of William Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564 and died on April 23, 1616. He was the third of eight children of John and Mary Shakespeare. His father was the mayor of Stratford. There is not much known about his childhood. At the age of eighteen he married twenty-six year old Anne Hathaway. They had a daughter Susanna, and twins named Hamnet and Judith. He wrote his first play, *Henry VI, Part 1* around 1589. At this time in his life he was living in London and working as playwright and actor. He became very successful and earned quite a bit of money. In addition to the thirty-eight plays that he wrote, modified or collaborated on, Shakespeare is the author of 154 sonnets.

Activity 9 Writing a Book Report

In the Pittsburgh Public Schools, all students are responsible for reading twenty-five books each year, so the children are used to writing book reports. We usually follow the form provided in our Silver Burdett English text, which is as follows:

Title

Author

Setting

Summary

Opinion

For the books that they read which are funny, or by known comic authors, I would ask them to discuss what made the book funny, and identify at least one comical passage. Our school librarian has indicated that she will have a number of books available that have comic elements for the children to select from.

Activity 10 The Talent Show

As a culminating event we will have a talent show. Students will have the choice of reading a limerick or funny poem, telling jokes or riddles, putting on a short skit or comedy routine or singing a funny song. At this time anyone who wants to demonstrate their funny mask or clown costume may do that as well. We could also read our personal narratives, research reports, or book reports at this time. I will set the room up like a comedy club and invite parents and other dignitaries.

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Davis, Jim, Garfield’s Twentieth Anniversary Collection, Ballantine Books, New York, 1998

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Jones, Loyal and Wheeler, Billy, Hometown Humor, USA, August House Inc. New York, 1991

Keller, Charles, Best Riddle Book Ever, Sterling Publishing Co. Inc. New York, 1997

Keller, Charles, The Little Giant Book of School Jokes, Sterling Publishing Co. Inc., New York, 2000

Kessler, Leonard, Old Turtle's 90 Knock-Knocks, Jokes, and Riddles, Greenwillow Books, New York, 1991

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Ragno, Nancy, Toth, Marion, and Gray, Betty, Silver Burdett English, Silver Burdett, Atlanta, 1985

Sabin, Francene, Mozart, Young Music Genius, Troll Associates, 1990

Silverstein, Shel, A Light in the Attic, HarperCollins, New York, 1981

Terban, Marvin, Funny You Should Ask, Clarion Books, Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston, 1992

Thomas, Lynn, Ha! Ha! Ha!, Firefly Books, New York, 2001

Watterson, Bill, Something Under the Bed is Drooling, Universal Press, New York, 1988

Materials for Classroom Use

1. Text book and library books that were previously mentioned
2. Materials to construct masks and costumes
3. Television with VCR
4. Phonograph, tape and CD player
5. Records, Tapes and CDs
6. Video tapes from the library and/or video stores
7. Paper and markers for cartoons
8. Computers

Student Learning Standards

All staff members of the Pittsburgh Public Schools expect all students to achieve at high standards of academic performance and behavior. The academic standards describe the knowledge and skills which students will be expected to demonstrate before graduating from public school. Pittsburgh has sixty-two academic standards. My curriculum unit is mainly concerned with the communication and science standards. I will also address some of the citizenship standards. The standards are as follows:

Communication Standards

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform, and persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify the purpose structure, and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform, or describe.
9. All students communicate appropriately in business, work, and other applied situations.

4 Advanced

3 Proficient

2 Basic

1 Below Basic

4 Shows a good sentence order

Understands the topic completely

Uses an interesting variety of words

Makes few or no mistakes in grammar, punctuation or spelling

Has more than enough details

3 Shows good sentence order

Shows some understanding of the topic

Uses some variety in words

Makes some errors in grammar, spelling or punctuation

Has a sufficient amount of details

2 Sentences may be confusing or inconsistent

Assignment may be incomplete

Shows limited choice of words

Makes too many errors in grammar, spelling or punctuation

Does not have enough detail

- 1 The assignment is too confusing or incomplete to grade

Suggested Research Topics

1. Bud Abbott
2. Fred Allen
3. Gracie Allen
4. Lucille Ball
5. Jack Benny
6. Milton Berle
7. George Burns
8. Sid Ceasar
9. Bill Cosby
10. Lou Costello
11. Jimmy Durante
12. W.C. Fields
13. Jackie Gleason
14. Whoopi Goldberg
15. Cary Grant
16. Oliver Hardy
17. Danny Kaye
18. Buster Keaton
19. Stan Laurel
20. Jay Leno
21. David Letterman
22. Jerry Lewis
23. Dean Martin
24. Steve Martin
25. Eddie Murphy
26. The Marx Brothers
27. Richard Pryor
28. Gilda Radner
29. Joan Rivers
30. Will Rogers
31. Roseanne
32. Lily Tomlin
33. Robin Williams
34. Any other comic personality of your choice