

## Assignment #5: Critical Parody

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### OVERVIEW

We all like to laugh and be entertained by comedians, funny T.V. shows, and silly stories. But as writers like William Zinsser, Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz point out, there's often a greater purpose to humor than simply "getting a laugh." Programs like *The Daily Show*, publications such as *The Onion*, and song parodies by Weird Al Yankovich provide just a few examples of how humor can be used to offer commentary on many aspects of popular culture. In this assignment, you will craft a critical parody or other piece of humor for the purpose of critiquing a genre, person, organization, trend, event, or other topic. The purpose of the assignment is to deepen your understanding of how composition strategies such as parody can be used as powerful tools for dispatching social critique and commentary.

### CHOOSING A TOPIC

From Shakespeare to Seinfeld, the best humor emerges from observations about everyday life. Think about things you've seen on the news, around campus, and in your community; think about bizarre patterns of human behavior, ridiculous celebrity stunts, and mind-boggling paradoxes you've noticed in your own workplace. This type of careful observation will help you to determine a subject and genre for your parody.

- **Possible Subjects:**
  - Current political candidates (think of the *SNL* parodies of Sarah Palin)
  - A trend that you've noticed (think of *The Onion's* focus on obsessions with plastic surgery)
  - An event (e.g., presidential debates, the SuperBowl, American Idol, etc.)
  - A notorious celebrity (the possibilities are endless)
  
- **Possible Genres:**
  - The "academic" essay (what makes it "academic" anyways?)
  - MySpace or Facebook profiles (think of the various sections that people fill out)
  - Popular songs (especially ones that communicate very specific images and ideas)
  - Political speeches (state of the union addresses, stump speeches, etc.)
  - Newspaper articles (how is information communicated in this genre?)

This list is just a starting point for ideas. Start playing around with possibilities: What if you wrote your own "modest proposal" to a current "problem" facing college students? What if you revised a classic fairy tale to include modern characters and/or plot line – how would the story and message change? What if you crafted a MySpace or Facebook profile for a famous person, such as Chuck Norris or William Shakespeare?

### LENGTH REQUIREMENTS

Since you will be working with different genres, there is no set length requirement for this project – but use common sense. The length should be governed by the amount of space needed to develop your point within the standard conventions of your genre. If you're using a genre (such as a traditional essay) that is primarily text-based, then your word count will probably be longer than if you were to choose something like a MySpace profile, which may have less text, but more images and graphic features as part of the "text" (which you will then need to incorporate into your parody). If you are unsure, look at some examples and then come talk to me.

## THE SUBJECT/GENRE ANALYSIS

Any parody must start with an *original*. Thus, once you have determined the focus of your parody, you will need to do some exploration and analysis of both your choice of subject and your choice of genre so that you can get a better idea of which aspects to imitate and which aspects to change for rhetorical effect. Your analysis should include the following:

- **Information about your subject:** Who/what will be the focus of your parody? What do you know about that person/place/thing? What is the person/place/thing famous for? What is the public response to that person/place/thing? What are some characteristics or words that you might associate with that person/place/thing (think of appearances, behaviors, habits, settings, etc). Attach to your analysis any printouts (pictures, articles, etc) that may be useful in illustrating the characteristics of your chosen subject.
- **Information about your genre:** What are the common features of the genre you've chosen to work with? For example, if I chose the genre of the 5-paragraph essay, I would note the typical presence of an introduction, thesis statement, body paragraphs, conclusion, topic sentences, supporting evidence, "formal" tone, MLA format, etc. A MySpace profile, on the other hand, will have a very different set of generic features. After discussing the typical features associated with your chosen genre, explain why you think this genre is the best choice for parodying your subject. Attach to your analysis a "real" example from your chosen genre (or, if you're parodying a specific song or text, attach the original).
- **Your Parody Plan:** Finally, explain how you see your parody concept coming together. How do you see the subject matter and genre working together to form a new message? What characteristics do you plan to exploit in your parody? Which genre conventions do you plan to change to help you exploit those characteristics? What will be the overarching purpose of your parody? To poke fun at the behaviors of a particular group? To highlight the flawed logic of a current argument? To expose the ridiculousness of a popular event? Describe what you envision as the overall impact of the piece and how readers should interpret your message.

**\*\*\*Due Monday, 11/10 by 4 p.m., in my East Hall mailbox\*\*\***

## GRADING STANDARDS: CRITICAL PARODY

### *Subject/Genre Analysis* – 15 Points

The analysis includes detailed information about the chosen subject and genre of the parody, including analysis of the characteristics of the subject, a variety of words/terms/phrases associated with that subject, an overview of features of the chosen genre, and explanation for why that genre was chosen. The analysis includes a “real” example from the chosen genre (or the original text/song, if a specific text/song is being parodied), as well as any other information that may be useful in providing a clear picture of the subject of the parody. A clear plan/vision for the parody concept is included, with details about how the writer plans to achieve that plan.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *Portrayal of Subject* – 15 points

The parody provides a clear sketch of the person/place/thing/idea being discussed, highlighting (or exaggerating, when appropriate) key characteristics noted in the subject/genre analysis. The parody provides a clear point of view – a distinct “lens” through which readers are to view and interpret the subject.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *Adherence to/Deviation from Genre Conventions* – 15 Points

The parody successfully imitates the language and other conventions of the chosen genre, taking artful deviations from those conventions when appropriate for making a point. The formatting and appearance of the piece is consistent with conventions established by the genre.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *Rhetorical Impact* – 15 points

The message of the parody is clear – the overall effect of the piece is consistent with the author’s original plan (as outlined in the subject/genre analysis). All elements of the piece work together to create a unified whole that provides a clear and clever message for readers.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *Coherence* – 10 points

The text is free of unintentional errors in syntax, word choice, spelling, grammar, usage, and mechanics (errors that are used deliberately in service of poking fun at the subject or genre will be allowed, so long as they are executed effectively).

Poor Fair Good Excellent

**TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE: 70**