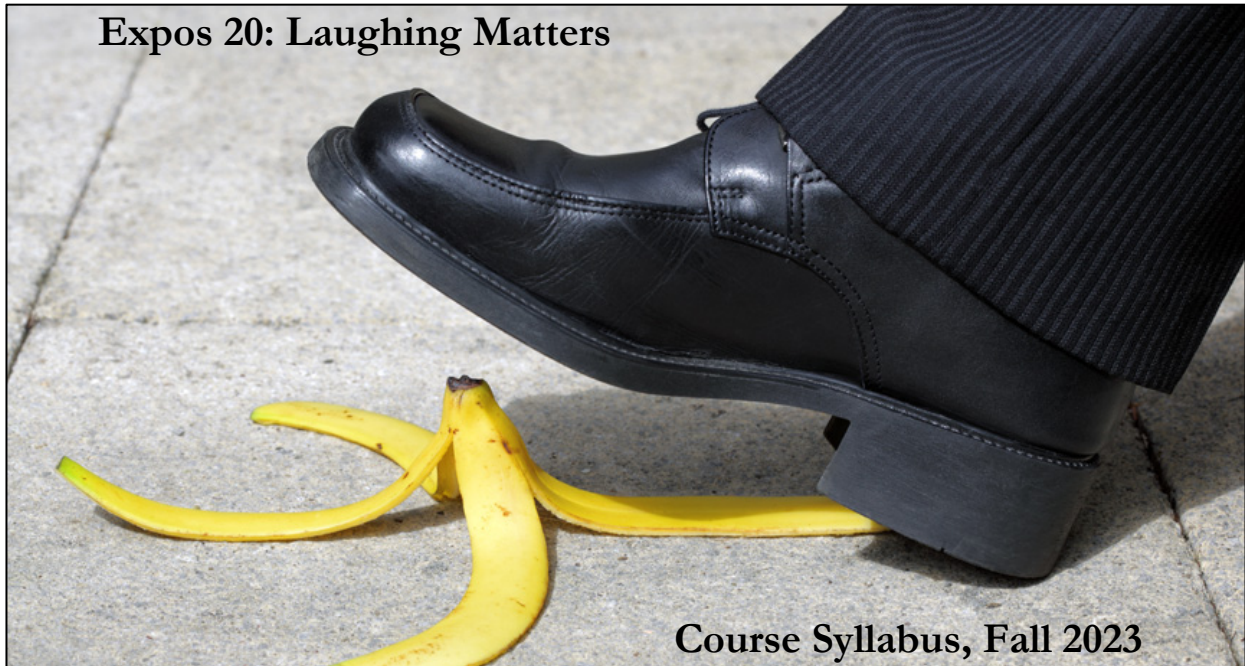


## Expos 20: Laughing Matters



## Course Syllabus, Fall 2023

Instructor: Elliott Turley (he/him)

Course Location: Sever Hall, Room 101

Course Times: T/TH 10:30-11:45AM

T/TH 12:00-1:15PM

Email: [eturley@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:eturley@fas.harvard.edu)

Office: One Bow Street, Room 213

Office Hours: T 2:00-4:00PM

and by Appointment

### Course Description

Humor is serious business. Laugh if you will, but comedy is hard work—and the right sense of humor is often the key to career success, surviving adversity, or even finding love. We will laugh in Laughing Matters, but our primary goal will be to examine how comedy works and what it does. Our discussions will span literary, sociological, psychological, and philosophical treatments of comedy as we unpack jokes and their social contexts, exploring both what makes an audience laugh and why humor matters. First, we will consider comedy from a philosophical and psychological perspective, testing theories of comedy against actual examples of humor to see what those theories can (or can't) teach us about how comedy works. Then, for our research paper, we'll turn to the big social and ethical questions around comedy to assess what humor does. How can it create bonds, perform cruelty, provoke thought, or teach lessons? Students will select one of these big questions or a question of their own and dive into a comic performance, genre, or history of their choice to answer it. Finally, in a capstone project, students will use their newly gained academic knowledge of comedy to craft a public facing review of a comedic act of their choice, orienting their insights toward a broader audience.

### Texts

All texts will be supplied by the instructor, though students may be expected to attend comic performances or events.

## Course Goals

This course aims to equip students with the fundamentals of academic argument. By learning the conventions of college-level writing, we will grow as thinkers, stretching ourselves to rigorously engage with a variety of texts, contribute to conversations about them, and formulate original arguments of our own. This course will hone the foundational skills of college success: how to listen, think, read, write, and research critically.

For this section of Expos 20, we will critically examine humor. Like college writing, comedy is a skill that can be sharpened over time, requires careful attention to detail, and ultimately will have its success judged not by the writer but their audience. In our discussions and assignments, we will consider both *how* humor works—what goes into making a successful joke—and *what* humor does. More than a manual for how to be funny, this course will challenge students analyze humor in its social, political, philosophical, psychological, and historical contexts.

Above all else, however, “Laughing Matters” is an academic writing course, and comedy is our launching point for considering and—ultimately—producing successful college-level arguments. To that end, keep in mind:

- **Writing is thinking:** Although it’s common to hear (and say) “I have the ideas; I just can’t express them,” that’s not really how ideas work. The primary goal of this course isn’t to teach clever writing gimmicks but to use the writing process to sharpen your analytical thinking.
- **Writing is a process:** We improve our writing by revising it. Don’t expect to compose the perfect thesis—let alone the perfect paper—the first time around. Our course is structured so that you have the chance to reconsider every idea you produce. Take advantage of it.
- **Writing is a conversation:** Good writing requires awareness of one’s audience. Rather than a generalized “public,” both academic and non-academic writing should be aware of its intended recipient, carefully considering social mores and disciplinary conventions. A successful college paper will take place in a scholarly conversation, not a silo.

Finally, importantly, although you’ll work hard to sharpen our academic writing and our critical analysis of comedy, expect to have some fun along the way. It is a class about comedy, after all.

## Unit Overview

In **Unit 1**, students will compose a four- or five-page performance analysis of a stand-up routine, using theoretical scholarship on humor as a secondary source.

In **Unit 2**, students will select a disciplinary angle to study comedy from, develop a research question analyzing a comic subject of their choice from that perspective, and compose an eight- to ten-page research paper answering that question.

In the **Capstone Project**, students will craft a public-facing review of a comic piece of performance.

## Classroom Expectations

One of the benefits of Expos is its small class size. That benefit is best realized when every student participates fully in the class; you learn much more from formulating, articulating, and questioning your own thoughts than from simply listening to what others have to say. Our time together is largely devoted to discussion and small-group work. You are responsible for being in class, prepared and on time, each time we meet. Being prepared for class means that you have given careful thought to the reading and writing assignments for our class, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussions for the day. While in class, “participating” means contributing to class activities and discussions in ways that *raise the level of discourse*. That is: talking a great deal is not necessarily the same thing as great participation; indeed, talking too frequently can lead to imbalance and discomfort for others. Actively listening to classmates, responding with relevance to others’ comments, and reflecting and building on your classmates’ ideas leads to a strong participation grade. This class is your community, and you have great power to shape it.

## Content Note

At times in this course, we will cover material that may be disturbing, even traumatizing, to some students. If you ever feel the need to step outside during one of these discussions, you may always do so without academic penalty. (You will, however, be responsible for any material you miss. If you do leave the room for a significant time, please make arrangements to get notes from another student or see me individually.) If you ever wish to discuss your personal reactions to this material, either with the class or with me afterwards, I welcome such discussion as an appropriate part of our coursework.

## Attendance

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. It is an official program-wide policy that if you are absent without medical or religious excuse more than **twice**, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed. On your **second** unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your peril.

You are expected to let me know promptly if you will miss a class; you remain responsible for the work due that day and for any new work assigned. Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In those circumstances, you should contact me as soon as possible (and please note you may need to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Freshman Dean). Absences because of special events, such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts **are not** excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences, letting me know in advance. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you must directly petition the Associate Director of Expository Writing, who will grant such a petition only in extraordinary circumstances.

Class begins and ends on time. Being consistently late will negatively impact your engagement grade.

## Assignments and Grading

All assignments will be collected via Canvas. The assignment grade weight is listed below. For both the Unit 1 and Unit 2 essays, only the revision, not the earlier drafts, will be graded.

Engagement:	10%
Unit 1 Paper (4-5 Pages):	25%
Unit 2 Annotated Bibliography:	5%
Unit 2 Paper (8-10 Pages):	40%
Capstone Project(4-5 Pages):	20%

Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, it is an official program-wide policy that **you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course**, and you must write them within the schedule of the course (not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind). If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements. The letter will specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date (unless you have documented a medical problem), you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed.

## Academic Honesty

Throughout the semester we'll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

## Policy on Collaboration

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook*, "Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading." However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

## Accessibility Accommodations

Students with accessibility needs should contact the Accessibility Services office at <http://aeo.fas.harvard.edu/> or 617-496-8707 and reach out to me directly as well. I'm happy to accommodate you, but it's important we figure out what that will mean for our course sooner rather than later.

## A Note on Generative AI

One of the essential elements of the Expos curriculum is the work we do on effective source use, appropriate acknowledgement of sources, and expectations for citing sources in academic writing. In each unit, we will practice strategies for working with the ideas of other authors and sources, and for developing your own ideas in response to them. Most forms of academic writing involve building on the ideas of other writers and thinkers, contributing ideas of your own, and signaling clearly for readers where each idea comes from. This complex relationship with sources is part of our work through the whole semester, and you should always feel free to ask me questions about this material.

As we become familiar with the expectations of an academic audience, we will also work on strategies to avoid errors in citation and unintentional plagiarism. As with all your courses, the expectation in Expos is that **all the work that you submit for this course must be your own. Your work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment.** Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

In addition to acknowledging how other writers have contributed to your work, doing your work with integrity means developing ideas that are wholly and genuinely yours. For this reason, **students are prohibited from using ChatGPT or other generative AI tools for any stage of the writing process in Expos.** The reasons for this policy in Expos are important: you discover your ideas in the messy process of drafting and revising them. Engaging with that writing process develops your ability to think clearly, organize that thinking, find appropriate evidence, pursue deeper nuances in and counterarguments to your claims and the evidence you use to present them, and work through alternative positions and evidence. To outsource any of that process to AI robs you of the practice with these skills that will strengthen your thinking; turning to AI essentially means you are giving up *your voice* in an essay, accepting instead an average and generic answer (which is what generative AI produces). In your Expos course, submitting work as yours that you did not develop or create on your own is a violation of the Harvard College Honor Code.

While the product of an Expos class may be the papers that you write, the broader goal is to strive to become better *thinkers*. The ability to participate independently in important discussions, the confidence to add your voice to challenging topics, the precision of mind to understand when a speaker is credible and should be taken seriously and when that isn't the case—these are all skills you develop through that rigorous thinking process that writing fosters. Allowing generative AI to take the place of that thinking shortchanges your development as a writer, a thinker, and a creative participant in developing ideas. In our class, your classmates and I are eager to hear what *you* have to say.