



Adding a Dash of Humor

Or, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Printer ..."

By Donna Boen

We writers and editors are a sincere and serious people. We work hard to produce the best publications we can, down to every jot and tittle.

The unsuspecting might question why we use the serial comma. But they'll ask only once. We live for that kind of challenge, reaching for our Chicago Manuals and AP Stylebooks while we launch into a 45-minute oration.

No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Our readers are all the better because of our fierce diligence, but sometimes ... occasionally, mind you, they appreciate it when we lighten up.

I don't mean they're looking for knee-slapping guffaws. The plus side of being earnest is that when we take even the smallest of steps in a walk on the humorous side, readers appreciate the change of pace.

DARE TO PLAY

I know, I know. You're up against the wall on deadlines, the budget won't pay for one more pencil or pixel, and you just spilled a nonfat chocolate mocha all over your laptop. You don't have time for humor.



Dear Diary, About college...

Editor's note: With another school year well under way, this seems like a good time to share comments from freshmen in Dean Disher's English III class last fall who kept journals of their first month of college. Where requested, the names have been changed to protect our current assignments.

Setting in

Dan

After we unloaded the car and were in my room, my dad was in a hurry to get home; my mom was not. She pulls out the camera and starts to take pic-

ture. After about a half of a roll of film, my dad starts yelling that they had to get home before dark. I walked them to the car, and we said our goodbyes. They got into the car, and as they pulled away, I could see the tears running down my mom's face. I almost broke down right there in the parking lot.

Chloe

Our room is what college students would label average. We have a refrigerator (holds two ice cube trays in the freezer), a microwave (great for microwaves brownies), a hot pot (needed for us three), two fans (our

generation is accustomed to central air), a remote control color television (we didn't want to get up and change the channel), a computer (typing is faster than writing), and three curling irons, three hair dryers, two sets of curlers, and an iron.

Susan

I have the best roommate. I think it's fun that we're grouped together. I was so worried before I got to college that I wouldn't be able to be myself even in my own dorm room. But it's not like that at all. We talk about everything: guys, home, stress, and everything else. There

are so many things that we share and have in common, it's nice. She's my real sister.

Melvin

One minute I love college and everyone here, and the next I find myself thinking, "I'm not ready for this." I love the freedom...but I sometimes don't like the feeling that I'm more or less grown up.

Chloe

Soups can be a way to meet other people. At 3 o'clock afternoon, six people were crammed into our room watching *General Hospital*. I read in a magazine article once that college kids who watch soaps are less likely to be homesick.

BY ANDREW FAUGHT

No Whey!

European Union claims U.S. up to no Gouda, demands new cheese names

Ha!



This is no ordinary food fight.

In one corner is the European Union (EU). Its 28 member states are pursuing a free-trade pact with the United States that could ban the sale of American-made cheeses on the continent if manufacturers continue to identify their products by Eurocentric identifiers: Parmesan, Asiago, Gorgonzola, and Feta among them.

On the other side are opponents who include Jeffrey Schwager '82, president of the Plymouth, Wis.-based Sartori Co., a 75-year-old, family-owned artisan cheese business. He argues that such names are generic and long-standing.

"When the EU was formed in the '90s, some of the things that were done to create incentives for countries to join were to create geographic indicators, so Parmesan — for Parma — and Asiago could only be made in Italy, or Feta in France, and all of those things were agreed upon," Schwager says. "But what they're thinking now is they can get protection for these geographic indicators everywhere else in the world. And it's not just dairy. They're looking at Bologna; they're looking at Bratwurst."

Schwager, who earned a business degree at Miami, has voiced concerns in congressional hearings and to officials in the U.S. Trade Ambassador's Office and the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

He arrived at Sartori in 2006, a time of transition not only for that company, but also for cheese producers around the United States.

"U.S. cheese companies have really gotten better over the last 10 to 15 years," he says, noting that Sartori's match award-winning varieties manufactured at the plant. "It really is world class."

Schwager joined Sartori after spending more than 19 years as president of Milwaukee-based Rite-Hite Products

Corp., which builds loading dock safety systems. The cheesemaker's CEO, James Sartori, told the local business journal at the time that Schwager had "successfully built profitable businesses through people development and innovative products."

His newest challenge is a decidedly different kind of trial. A trade pact, which would remove tariffs and ease regulatory burdens, could be hammered out by the end of the year. The Obama administration, meanwhile, has said that it's not ready to cede to European demands. American grocery conglomerate Kraft, however, already has protected its place in the European market by renaming its Parmesan "Parmesello Italiano."

No matter how you slice it, it's the potential impact on their bottom line that has American cheesemakers worried.

"Europe is looking at having trade protection in three-fourths or more of the world's economy 15 to 20 years from now," Schwager says. "It would be a substantial hurt to the specialty cheese producers here in the United States. We actually make more Parmesan and Asiago cheese in the United States than they make in Italy. In a lot of cases, we've built the market for these cheeses worldwide."

European demands are eliciting a one-word rebuttal: Bologney.

"We're talking about products that for decades, if not generations, have been produced in many areas of the world, and long ago came to signify a type of cheese or food that could be made anywhere," says Shawna Morris, made anywhere, says Shawna Morris, senior director of the international sector director of the international Consortium for Common Food Names, a nonprofit alliance fighting to preserve generic food names.

"Efforts to block competitors' usage of these commonly used food names, in our view, simply amount to trying to limit competition," Morris adds. "What we're saying is allow these products to go head-to-head in the marketplace and let the consumer decide."

At Sartori, Schwager has dramatically raised the profile of the company, which traditionally has served the ingredient and food service marketplace. Public support for their products propelled Sartori in 2006 to expand into retail stores with a platter of artisan fare, cheeses, which include Asiago and Gorgonzola, have won more than 200 awards in international competitions.

In 2013, Sartori's Sarvecchio Parmesan beat out Italian competitors and took first place in the Global Cheese Awards, the world's oldest competition of its kind. ("There's a real fruity flavor of it and then you're going to get a caramelized, nutty finish on the back," Schwager says of the winning entry).

In a fit of pique, the Italians threatened legal action against contest organizers and made them remove results from the competition website. The Parmesan category was eliminated the following year and renamed "open class for hard cheeses."

"Pety is a good word to describe it," Schwager says. "We think the industry gets better if everybody improves what they're doing, and there is more world-class cheese out there for the consumer."

If Sartori wants to sell its Parmesan on the continent, Europeans have suggested an alternative name: hard grating cheese. It's enough to make Schwager wince.

"It doesn't quite sound the same way, does it?" he says. "We're in an



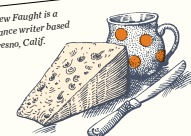
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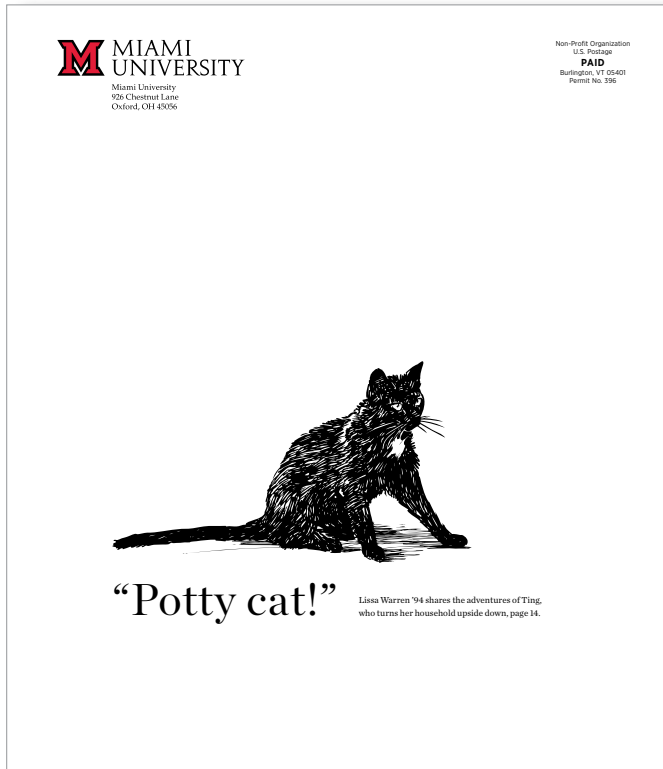
interesting time right now, and you just don't know what is going to come out of a big negotiation like this."

After all, we're issues abound.

Andrew Faught is a freelance writer based in Fresno, Calif.



Miamian humor-writing tips: Tread carefully when including branded products in your sight gags (top); and pun humor is most effective when used sparingly (bottom).



But you know what? You're always going to be fighting tight deadlines and budgets and spilled mocha, so why not play a little? Heaven knows our publications could use a lighter tone now and again, and you might even enjoy it.

I am not proposing you try a Knock Knock or any other kind of outright joke. Not in the beginning (and probably not ever). What I am suggesting is that you warm up your editorial voice and stretch a little. You might opt for droll or find banter surprisingly refreshing. Not in every article or on every page, of course. Obviously, not everything lends itself to lightheartedness. However, you might be surprised at how a serious feature benefits from a lighter headline. Humor can be a simple tool that sparks interest.

When one of our history professors shared the story behind Lincoln's writing of the Gettysburg address, we pulled readers in with the headline "Four Drafts & Seven Edited Versions Ago" It caught them off-guard, and they enjoyed that.

My first attempt at connecting with humor was with my editor's note, a great place to show your publication's humanity. I'd been writing a column for several years before I became brave enough to dip my toe in the shallow end of playfulness. I chose as my topic my first 5K. I left no doubt of my intent when I titled it "Stop the Race (I want to pass out)."

Between you and me, having just read the column again for the first time in years, I see perhaps a few good lines ("I run only to grab the last slice of chocolate chip cheesecake in the refrigerator.") and some lines that probably should have been deleted ("My breath's coming

“What I am suggesting is that you warm up your editorial voice and stretch a little. You might opt for droll or find banter surprisingly refreshing.

faster and louder than a 5-foot, 100-pound woman giving birth to a 20-pound baby.”).

To all the moms in the world, I apologize. I was way overwriting. Still, at least I tried. And because people — in particular my alumni director — told me they enjoyed my humor and were pleasantly surprised by it, I tried more.

WATCH YOUR STEP

After you start walking on the humorous side, expect a few missteps. Early on, I misinterpreted punny for funny. The occasional “No Whey” headline on an article about Parmesan cheese may pass mustard ... er ... muster, but resist the urge to make every other headline a groaner.

Another stumbling block is that not everyone understands humor. I don't mean your humor specifically. I mean all humor. In their minds, it's simply silliness and serves no useful purpose.

You likely won't convert those people. That's OK. Most of what we produce in our publications is for the serious-minded, so they're not excluded for long when we share a laugh with readers who enjoy a chuckle.

But beware; even your fun-loving fans will let you go only so far. Use your jocularity judiciously. Written humor can sometimes be difficult to interpret and easily misunderstood.

That happened to me in my first — and last — attempt at satire. I created a holiday, “Take Your Mother to Work Day,” and talked about my mom job shadowing me for eight hours — nothing either of us would do in real life. We're close, but not that close. Anyway, I thought my writing was so over the top on that particular editor's note that people would understand it was made up of whole cloth. They didn't, and I vowed from then on to base my humor in truth.

like classic pastrami was not like
fatty, not too strong, not too chewy.
This sandwich was rated first by
two people, second by two people
and fourth by two people, nobody
in other words, disliked it. And at
\$5.80 it was the cheapest of the lot.



*Bring on the funnyman (or woman, as the case may be).
Miamian injected humor into a recent issue by profiling
an alumna who specializes in it: stand-up comedian
Beth Stelling.*



Humor writing is that much more challenging because you can't help it along with a wink or a smile. OK, yes, you can put “wink wink” in parenthesis, but that type of laugh-track prompt in text usually comes across as lame.

I also caution you to choose your targets carefully. You know those fans I mentioned? They'll let you know if you use too much self-deprecating humor. For them, a little goes a long way.

If that strikes you as odd, I'm with you. Shouldn't we be free to make fun of ourselves? Apparently not, and that's because, perhaps a bit ironically, once readers come to enjoy our unique, playful voice, they feel as if they truly know us. To paraphrase Martha, “That's a good thing.” As a result, they are protective of us and don't like it when we are the butt of our own jokes. So be nearly as gentle with yourself as you are with others.

DON'T FORGET ART

Inanimate objects are safer to play with than people and easier to photograph. Usually. Plus, any writer worth her weight in bon mots wants eye-catching art that will stop readers from flipping past her clever prose.

For our summer magazine, we wrote three stand-alone stories with their own subheads. Our designer then whipped up some whimsy and pulled the three into a package. She opened each feature with a full-page piece of fun, colorful art — a worn baseball glove in the grass, a huge helping of ice cream, and two luscious pies. She then added a continuous headline of “Baseball, (first feature) Ice Cream, (second feature) & Apple Pie (final feature)” that flowed from one story to the next in a bold font.

“When we take even the smallest of steps in a walk on the humorous side, readers appreciate the change of pace.”

By the way, ice cream and hot studio lights? Not a good combo. The black raspberry chocolate chip melted faster than we could shoot. We finally threw in the spoon and reprinted someone else's pint-sized glamour shot. On the plus side, we got in several tasty licks. Nice perk.

Another way to try your hand at humor might be to profile someone in the biz. In our most recent magazine, I interviewed an alum of ours who is a rising star in stand-up. She returned to campus to perform during Homecoming Weekend.

I, as the writer, took on the role of straight woman and let her have all the best lines. “My mom and I, we go way back,” she quipped. We opted to tease her story on the back cover with brightly colored candied sprinkles and one of her punch lines, “The only breach was in my self-control. The third trip was just toppings.”

Although featuring a comedian might seem like an easy way to go, it offered some challenges. For one, her act wasn't G rated. I had to be careful what material I used. At the same time, I needed readers to know, in case they attend her show, that she might make them blush. The second challenge was that I wanted to start with quick one-liners to set the tone. But she tells long, involved stories. Lest I keep you up tonight worrying about my dilemma, I found the material I needed.

This feature on our comedian is a prime example of how a talented designer can “sell” your story even before readers look at your lead. Just like music sets the mood within the first few notes, an imaginative designer can do the same with a simple piece of art on the back cover. It intrigues your reader to open your publication. Bazinga! That's what we all want.

WATCH YOUR AIM

Contrary to what I suggested earlier, inanimate objects aren't always a safe bet.



For one article, we shared excerpts from journals freshmen kept during their English 111 class. We wanted the accompanying photo to match the tomfoolery tone in the text, so we asked a freshman to sit on top of a dorm washer, placed a football in his hands, an empty pizza box next to his right knee, and scattered piles of laundry around the floor.

Mildly amusing? Perhaps. At least worth a reminiscent smile from our alumni. As we looked through the viewfinder, we decided it would be even funnier if the photo showed detergent spewing out of the Maytag, much to his obliviousness.

Gotta say, I still think that's cute. Unfortunately, we, as in the editor and the art director, got caught up in our own "cleverness" and decided to embellish our sight gag. We placed a clearly labeled box of Tide front and center.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. I doubt Procter & Gamble Co. would have thought so. I know my boss didn't. In hindsight, I see his point. P&G is just down the road from us and a major employer for our new graduates and many of our alumni. I doubt its CEO would have laughed at our implication that its top-selling soapsuds had malfunctioned.

That's when we found out you must tread carefully when going for a chuckle, even among your dirty laundry. The Tide stayed in the photo. The stray suds disappeared right before we went to press, costing us time and money.

“Humor writing is that much more challenging because you can't help it along with a wink or a smile.”

EMBRACE THE LIGHT

You may have noticed that I used the word “dorm.” I prefer it to “residence hall.” It feels more familiar and conversational to me. As we in the business know, words matter. So do patterns and rhythms, especially in humor writing. If you don't read your material out loud, give it a try. Your ear will tell you when your writing is crisp and fun or when you're getting bogged down in verbiage. A strong copy editor and honest friend are also handy.

Just as some words are funnier than others, so, too, are numbers. When I'm going for over-the-top exaggeration, I will pull a number out of the air and test it on my tongue. Does 432 seem funnier than 483?

The preference is completely subjective, of course, although 37 is apparently considered the funniest number in the world. Yes, I Googled it. Up popped a column on Splitsider by writer-comedian Eddie Brawley. I must confess that by the time he finished his 1,028-word analysis, 37 had lost all its luster.

Before a shepherd's crook extends from a side curtain and pulls me offstage, please allow me one final point. Make sure you and your boss are on the same page when it comes to employing humor. For your sake, and your readers', I hope your boss enjoys a bit of levity.

When done right, humor can make you and your words stand out. It's worth a try or three. You might even find writing it is ... dare I say it? Fun.

Donna Boen is editor of miamian, the alumni magazine at Miami University, the school in Ohio, not Florida. To quote a popular T-shirt around Oxford, Ohio: "We were a university before Florida was a state." Connect at tinyurl.com/linkedin-boen.