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## HOW TO TELL A JOKE

## HOW TO TELL A JOKE

Cicero, *De Oratore*, Liber 2.216–290

### ANTONIUS

[216b] . . . Suavis autem est et vehementer saepe utilis, iocus et facetiae; quae, etiam si alia omnia tradi arte possunt, naturae sunt propria certe, neque ullam artem desiderant.

In quibus tu longe aliis, meā sententiā, Caesar, excellis; quo magis mihi etiam aut (1) testis esse potes nullam esse artem salis, aut, (2) si qua est, eam tu potissimum nos docere.

## HOW TO TELL A JOKE

Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator*, Book 2.216–290

“Humor Us, Caesar—Explain Jokes!”

Caesar Takes a Stab [216–234]

ANTONY

[216b] . . . Humor and joking, though, is fun and often wicked effective. Every other aspect [*of public speaking*] might be teachable by rules, but humor is obviously something you’re born with and rules can’t do anything for it.

Caesar, in my view you’re far better than others at this, so you can easily back me up that joking either (1) isn’t a teachable skill or (2), if it is, then you’re the best person to teach it to us.

## DE ORATORE

### CAESAR

[217] Ego verò (*inquit*) omni de re facetius puto posse ab homine non inurbano quàm de ipsis facetiis disputari. Itaque, quom quosdam Graecos inscriptos libros esse vidissem “De Ridiculis,” nonnullam in spem veneram posse me ex iis aliquid discere. Inveni autem ridicula et salsa multa Graecorum—nam ét Siculi in eo genere et Rhodii et Byzantii et, praeter ceteros, Attici excellunt—sed qui eius rei rationem quandam conati sunt artemque tradere, sic insulsi extiterunt ut nihil aliud eorum nisi ipsa insulsitas rideatur! [218] Quare, mihi quidem nullo modo videtur doctrinā ista res posse tradi.

Etenim quom duo genera sint facetiarum, alterum aequabiliter in omni sermone fusum, alterum peracutum et breve, illa a veteribus superior “cavillatio,” haec altera “dicacitas”

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### CAESAR

[217] Actually, *I* think a decent funnyman can discuss *anything* with greater wit than wit itself. Let me explain. I once saw these Greek books titled *On Humor* and got excited, thinking I'd learn something from them. What I found, though, was lots of Greek quips and jokes—which makes sense, since the people of Sicily, Rhodes, Byzantium, and above all, Athens, are the leaders in this area.<sup>16</sup> But they were so ridiculous when they tried to schematize, systematize, and teach the “rules” behind them that the only thing I could laugh at was how ridiculous they were! [218] And that's why—to me at least—it seems impossible to teach a course in the topic you want.

The thing is, jokes actually come in *two* forms. The first kind permeate an entire speech, while the other come fast and razor-sharp. The ancients called the first kind “shtick” and the

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nominata est. Leve nomen habet utraque res—  
quippe! “Leve” enim est totum hoc risum  
movere.

[219] Verumtamen, ut dicis, Antoni, multum  
in causis persaepe lepore et facetiis profici vidi.  
Sed quom in illo genere perpetuae festivitatis ars  
non desideretur—natura enim fingit homines  
et creat imitatores et narratores facetos, adiu-  
vante ét vultu et voce et ipso genere sermonis—  
túm verò in hoc altero dicacitatis, ¿quid habet  
ars loci, quom ante illud facete dictum emis-  
sum haerere debeat quàm cogitari potuisse  
videatur?

[220] ¿Quid enim hic meus frater [*sc. Catu-  
lus*] ab arte adiuvari potuit quom, a Philippo in-  
terrogatus quid latraret,

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second “a sick burn.” Both have funny names—which makes sense, since the whole business of making people laugh is (*winking*) “funny” stuff.<sup>17</sup>

[219] That said, Antony, you’re right. I’ve often seen humor accomplish a great deal at trial. But you don’t need rules for that first category of ongoing banter [*i.e.*, *shtick*], because people are shaped by their genetics, and it’s that—plus some help from their facial expressions and voices and manner of speech itself—which makes them funny impressionists or storytellers. And since that’s true, then in the second category [*i.e.*, *sick burns*], too, where a zinger has to get fired off and hit its target before anyone could seemingly even *think* of it—well, how *could* there be rules?

[220] I mean, rules couldn’t have helped my brother Barker<sup>18</sup> here when Philip asked him, “What are you howling for?” and he shot back,

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“furem se videre”

respondit? Quid in omni oratione Crassus vel apud centumviros contra Scaevolam vel contra accusatorem Brutum, quom pro C. Planco diceret? Nam id quod tu mihi tribuis, Antoni, Crasso est omnium sentiētiā concedendum. Non enim fere quisquam reperietur praeter hunc in utroque genere leporis excellens, ét illo quod in perpetuitate sermonis ét hoc quod in celeritate atque dicto est.

[221] Nam haec perpetua contra Scaevolam Curiana defensio tota redundavit hilaritate quadam et ioco; dicta illa brevia non habuit. Parcebat enim adversarii dignitati, in quo ipse conservabat suam;

quod est hominibus facietis et dicacibus difficillimum, habere hominum rationem et temporum et ea quae occurrant, quom salsissime dici possint, tenere. Itaque, nonnulli ridiculi ho-

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“I see a thief!”

And what could rules have done for Crassus anywhere in that speech he gave in probate court against Scaevola or in the one defending Gaius Plancus against Brutus? Really, Antony, everyone thinks the honor you pay *me* should go to *Crassus*, because he’s pretty much the only one you’ll find who excels at both kinds of wit—that is, in the first category of keeping up the talk and in the second category of snappy comebacks.

[221] I mean, his entire *speech* defending Curius against Scaevola was bursting with good-natured, category-1 ribbing. It didn’t have those category-2 zingers because he wanted to spare his opponent’s dignity—and in doing that, he kept his own.

And *that* is the hardest thing for quick-witted people to do: to take stock of the people, the circumstances, and to hold back the quips that come to mind even when it would be totally

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mines hoc ipsum non insulse interpretantur  
[222] dicere Ennium

♪flammam a sapienti facilius ore in  
ardente opprimi quàm bona dicta  
teneat;♪

haec scilicet “bona” dicta, quae salsa sint; nam  
ea “dicta” appellantur proprio iam nomine.

Sed út in Scaevolā continuit ea Crassus atque  
illo altero genere, in quo nulli aculei contume-  
liarum inerant, causam illam disputationemque

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hilarious to say them. Accordingly (and this is pretty funny), some jokers twist these [222] lines of Ennius—

♪“When his mouth’s on fire, it’s easier for  
a wise man to suppress the flames  
than a good remark (*bona dicta*).”♪

—to say:

♪“When his mouth’s on fire, it’s easier  
for a wiseass to suppress the flames  
than a good wisecrack (*bona  
dicta*).”♪

They claim the “good” or “helpful” part of Ennius’s *dicta* obviously has to mean “funny” because *dicta* (“remark”) already means “wisecrack” all by itself!

But as much as Crassus kept away from those in dealing with Scaevola and instead made light

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ludit, sic in Bruto, quem oderat et quem dignum contumeliā iudicabat, utroque genere pugnavit. [223] ;Quàm multa de balneis quas nuper ille vendiderat, ;quàm multa de amisso patrimonio dixit! ;Atque illa brevia!—quom ille diceret se sine causā sudare:

Minime mirum (*inquit*); modo enim existi de balneis.

Innumerabilia huiuscemodi fuerunt, sed non minus iucunda illa perpetua. Quom enim Brutus duo lectores excitasset et alteri “De colonia Narbonensi” Crassi orationem legendam dedisset, alteri “De lege Servilia” et quom contraria inter sese de re publicā capita contulisset, noster hic facetissime “Tres” patris Bruti “De iure civili libellos” tribus legendos dedit.

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of the trial and their disagreement with the other kind—the one that doesn’t entail roasting anyone—when it came to Marcus Brutus, who he hated and thought deserved abuse, he unloaded with both kinds. [223] He went *crazy* on the spa Brutus had recently sold off and the inheritance he’d burned through! And those zingers!—such as when Brutus said, “I don’t see what I’m up here sweating for,” and he snapped back,

“No surprise there: you *did* just get out of the spa. . . .”

There were *countless* ones like that, but the continuous banter was just as funny. I mean, Brutus called in a couple readers to quote from a pair of policy speeches Crassus had given to different audiences, and then pointed out sections where Crassus had allegedly flip-flopped. And *that’s* when our friend Crassus here asked

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[224] Ex libro primo,

“Forte evenit ut in Privernati essemus ego  
et M. filius. . . .”

Brute, testificatur pater se tibi Privernatem  
fundum reliquisse.

Deinde, ex libro secundo,

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(*cracking up*)—it was totally hilarious—*three* people to come read bits from the *three* books of the dialogue *On Civil Law* that Brutus’s dad had written. Let me quote Crassus’s rebuttal.

### CAESAR QUOTES FROM CRASSUS’S REBUTTAL

*[Caesar now quotes extracts from Crassus’s rebuttal. The first three extracts begin with an inset quotation from Brutus’s father’s book, followed by Crassus’s commentary.]*

[224] First came book one:

“My son Marcus and I once found ourselves at our villa in Privernum . . .”

Brutus! Your father’s going on record that he left you an estate in Privernum.

Then came book two:

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“In Albano eramus ego et M. filius. . . .”

¡Sapiens videlicet homo cum primis nostrae civitatis norat hunc gurgitem! Metuebat ne, quom is nihil haberet, nihil esse ei relictum putaretur.

Tum, ex libro tertio, in quo finem scribendi fecit (tot enim, ut audiui Scaevolam dicere, sunt veri Bruti libri),

“In Tiburti forte adsedimus ego et M. filius. . . .”

Ubi sunt hi fundi, Brute, quos tibi pater publicis commentariis consignatos reliquit? Quod nisi puberem te, inquit, iam haberet, ¡quartum librum composuisset et se etiam

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“My son Marcus and I were at our villa in Alba . . .”

This guy’s *clearly* a genius, one of the smartest in the country! *He knew* (*glancing at Brutus*) this black hole. He was worried that once Brutus didn’t *have* anything, people would assume he hadn’t been *left* anything.

Then came book three, which is the last one he wrote (I heard Scaevola say there are three authentic books by Brutus):

“My son Marcus and I found ourselves holed up at our villa in Tivoli . . .”

Brutus, where *are* these estates your father left you? The bequest is recorded right here in this published treatise! If he didn’t think you were already grown up, I guess your father would’ve written a fourth book to document that:

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“in balneis locutum cum filio”

scriptum reliquisset!

[225] ¿Quis est, igitur, qui non fateatur hōc lepore atque his facetiis non minus refutatum esse Brutum quàm illis tragoediis quas egit īdem, quom casu in eādē causā funere efferretur anus Iunia? Pro di immortales, ¡quàe fuit illa, quànta vis! Quàm inexpectata! Quàm repentina! quom, coniectis oculis, gestu omni ei iminenti, summā gravitate et celeritate verborum, “Brute,” inquit,

“Quid sedes? Quid illam anum patri nuntiare vis tuo? ¿Quid illis omnibus, quorum imagines vides duci? Quid maioribus tuis? ¿Quid L. Bruto, qui hunc populum dominatu regio liberavit? Quid

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“My son and I were having a conversation at our spa. . . .”

[225] Everyone, *everyone*, would agree that Brutus got brought down by this ribbing and those wisecracks just as effectively as by those “tragedies” Crassus acted out when, at the same trial, the funeral procession for a distant relative of Brutus’s—an old woman—happened to come passing by. Good *gods!* You should have *seen* it, his zap! So sudden, so out of nowhere! Crassus fixed his eyes on Brutus, loomed over him with his every gesture, and, in a torrent of eloquence, intoned, “Brutus!”:—

“Why are you just sitting there? What do you want that lady to go tell your father? What should she tell all those people whose funeral masks are parading by? What about your ancestors? What about Lucius Brutus, the man who freed this

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te agere? ꝑCui rei, cui gloriae, cui virtuti studere? ꝑPatrimonione augendo? At id non est nobilitatis. Sed fac esse, nihil superest; libidines totum dissipaverunt. [226] An iuri civili? Est paternum; sed dicet te, quom aedīs venderes, ne in rutis quidem et caesis solium tibi paternum recepisse. An rei militari? ꝑQui numquam castra vīderis! An eloquentiae? ꝑQuae neque est in te, et, quicquid est vocis ac linguae, omne in istum turpissimum calumniae quaestum contulisti! Tu lucem aspicere audes? Tu hos intueri? Tu in foro, tu in Urbe, tu in civium esse conspectu? Tu illam mortuam, tu imagines ipsas non

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nation from tyranny? What should she say you're doing with your life? What achievements, what accomplishments, what greatness should she say you're working on? Increasing the wealth you inherited? But real nobles don't do that, and even if they did—well, there's nothing left! You partied it all away! [226] Law school, like your father? C'mon. She'll tell 'em that when you sold the house, you sold your father's barrister chair right along with it! A military career? You've never seen a barracks! Excellence in public speaking? You're no good at it! Besides, you've used what tongue and voice you *do* have for that most shameful way of making a buck: badmouthing! Do you really have the nerve to appear in public, to look at these folks here, to show your face in the Forum, show it in Rome, show it to your fellow citizens? Don't you *panic* at the

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perhorrescis? ;Quibus non modo imitandis, sed ne collocandis quidem, tibi locum ullum reliquisti!”

[227] Sed haec tragica atque divina; faceta autem et urbana innumerabilia vel ex una contione meministis. Nec enim contentio maior umquam fuit, nec apud populum gravior oratio, quàm huius contra collegam in censurā nuper, neque lepore et festivitate conditior. Quare tibi, Antoni, utrumque adsentior: ét (1) multum facetias in dicendo prodesse saepe, ét (2) eas arte nullo modo posse tradi. Illud quidem admiror, te nobis in eo genere tribuisse tantum et non huius rei quoque palmam, ut ceterarum, Crasso detulisse.

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sight of that dead lady, at those masks going by? You've left yourself no *room*—not only to imitate them, but heck, even to *display* them!”

[227] It was a majestic performance, out of this world. His endless quips and zingers, though, you can remember from just a single speech of his, because there's *never* been such an epic display of prowess or public speech more impressive than the one he recently gave attacking his colleague in office, and never one so well-peppered with good humor. And that's why I agree with you, Antony, on both points: (1) jokes *are* often highly effective in public speaking, and (2) there's just no way to teach them systematically. I really am surprised you gave me so much credit in this area instead of awarding the crown to Crassus, as in every other area.

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ANTONIUS

[228] *Tum Antonius* Ego verò ita fecissem (*inquit*) nisi interdum in hoc Crasso paulum inviderem. Nam esse quamvis facetum atque salsum, non nimis est per se ipsum invidendum; sed quom omnium sit venustissimus et urbanissimus, omnium gravissimum et severissimum ét esse ét videri, quod isti contigit uni, id mihi vix ferendum videbatur.

[229] *Hīc quom adrisisset ipse Crassus,*

Ac tamen (*inquit Antonius*) quom artem esse facetiarum, Iuli, negares, aperuisti quiddam quod praecipendum videretur.

Haberi enim dixisti rationem oportere hominum, rei, temporis, ne quid iocus de gravitate decerperet; quod quidem inprimis a Crasso

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ANTONY

[228] Actually, I would have, if I weren't a little jealous of Crassus about that. The thing is, there's nothing wrong with being a *very* funny person. But to be *the* wittiest, the *most* hilarious of all, and *at the same time* to be *and* to be acknowledged as the stateliest and most soaring of all—which applies to him alone—I really didn't think I could handle it.

[229] *Crassus grins, and Antony continues.*

Still, though, Caesar, when you claimed that joking is not a teachable skill, you put your finger on something that I *do* think needs to be taught.

You see, you said we need to take stock of the people, the case, and the circumstances, so that a joke won't compromise our authority—and it's true, Crassus really does do that. But this

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observari solet. Sed hoc praeceptum *praetermittendarum* est facetiarum, quom iis nihil opus sit. Nos autem quomodo utamur quom opus sit, quaerimus, ut in adversarium et maxime, si eius stultitia poterit agitari, in testem stultum, cupidum, levem, si facile homines audituri videbuntur.

[230] Omnino probabiliora sunt quae lacesiti dicimus quàm quae priores; nam ét (1) ingenii celeritas maior est quae apparet in respondendo, ét (2) humanitatis est responsio. Videmur enim quieturi fuisse, nisi essemus lacesiti; ut in ipsā istā contione nihil fere dictum est ab hōc, quod quidem facetius dictum videretur, quod non provocatus responderit. Erat autem tanta in Domitio gravitas, tanta auctoritas, ut, quod esset ab eo obiectum, lepore magis elevandum quàm contentione frangendum videretur.

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rule applies to *not* making jokes when there's no need of them. What we're *actually* interested in, though, is how to use them when we *do* need them, as for example against an opponent, and especially how to trigger a stupid, eager, light-weight witness when the audience looks receptive to him.

[230] In general, our comebacks are more impressive than our unprovoked cut-downs, for two reasons: (1) the quickness of a person's mind appears greater in a response, and (2) comebacks are indicative of good manners, since they suggest we never would've said anything if we hadn't been attacked. For example, in that very speech you mentioned [*in* 227], practically every quip Crassus made was a comeback to some attack. The colleague he was speaking against was such an authoritative, impressive figure that humor evidently stood a better chance of trivializing his allegations than arguments did of refuting them.

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SULPICIUS

[231] *Tum Sulpicius* Quid igitur? ꝑatiemur (*inquit*) Caesarem, qui, quamquam Crasso facetias concedit, tamen multo in eo studio magis ipse elaborat, non explicare nobis totum genus hoc iocandi, quale sit et unde ducatur, praesertim quom tantam vim et utilitatem salis et urbanitatis esse fateatur?

CAESAR

Quid si (*inquit Iulius*) adsentior Antonio dicenti nullam esse artem salis?

[232] *Hic quom Sulpicius reticuisset,*

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### SULPICIUS

[231] That's Caesar for you, folks: he concedes primacy in wisecracks to Crassus, though he spends a lot more time on them himself. So: should we let him off the hook, or should we make him explain this whole theory of joking to us, namely what it is and where it comes from, especially since he's admitting that humor is as powerful and effective as it is?

### CAESAR

What if I agree with Antony that joking is not a teachable skill?

[232] *When Sulpicius has no answer to make, Crass chimes in:*

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### CRASSUS

¡Quasi verò (*inquit Crassus*) horum ipsorum, de quibus Antonius iam diu loquitur, ars ulla sit! Observatio quaedam est, ut ipse dixit, earum rerum quae in dicendo valent; quae si eloquentis facere posset, ¿quis esset non eloquens? Quis enim haec non vel facile vel certe aliquo modo posset ediscere? Sed ego in his praeceptis hanc vim et hanc utilitatem esse arbitror, non ut ad reperendum quid dicamus arte ducamur, sed ut ea, quae naturā, quae studio, quae exercitatione consequimur, aut recta esse confidamus aut prava intellegamus, quom quo referenda sint, didicerimus.

[233] Quare, Caesar, ego quoque hoc a te peto, ut, si tibi videtur, disputes de hoc toto iocandi genere quid sentias, ne qua forte dicendi