

## Playing the Humor Card By Terri Martin

Think of writing as a handful of playing cards. There are many: setting the scene, developing characters, suspense, plot, resolution, to name a few. Then there's the humor card. Ya gotta know when to hold it and when to play it. Okay, so not the most original metaphor, but you get the idea. (My apologies to Kenny Rogers.)

Note, while I may refer to "character" often, which implies fiction, it can also be interpreted as a nonfiction "personage."

Most people enjoy feeling good and laughing or at least being amused. Humor is, in most cases, a non-habit-forming elixir. Studies have shown that laughing actually extends human life. How they can possibly verify this along with many other illuminating government-funded studies remains a mystery. However, for purposes of a selling point for humor, I embrace the study. Humor is a tool that makes readers laugh or be amused and entertained. Combined with other essential elements of writing, such as plot, suspense, characters, enlightenment, education, and so on, humor can nicely *show* the reader what you're trying to get across, whether fiction or nonfiction.

Instead of dry, plodding, preachy or overly dramatic prose, consider showing what happens when, say, a person has not changed the batteries in her smoke detector for several years. The rather bland advice to "Be sure to change your smoke detector batteries at least twice a year!" could be converted from telling to showing with a humorous anecdote.

*A mysterious little chirp wakes her at 2:00 a.m. She is momentarily terrified, then annoyed, then exasperated when the chirp of the smoke detector won't stop, no matter what she tries. Eventually she resorts to ripping the unit out of the ceiling and throwing it in the neighbor's yard, where it continues to chirp relentlessly, causing their dog to start barking.*

You get the picture.

Well, now wait, If I'm trying to make something "amusing," nobody will think I'm a serious writer. I mean, you've got your comedic writers and they are great and all, but I'm writing something involving all kinds of weighty topics. Having my reader chuckle in the midst of a murder scene or heart-wrenching breakup would be abhorrent. Or maybe I'm trying to explain the seriousness of some kinds of challenging endeavor or life-threatening illness, and inserting humor might make the reader feel I'm insensitive to people's feelings and obstacles. Okay, you don't poke fun at someone who just got a cancer diagnosis. But there may be an opportunity to lighten things up during their journey through chemotherapy. "Well," *Mary said staring at the mirror, "at least I will save money on hair appointments."* It's okay for Mary to try to bring humor to her difficult situation. She is doing it to make others feel more at ease and comfortable to be in her presence. Hey, Mary, I like *your style!* You are an inspiration.

When I started working on this presentation, I thought about what I enjoy reading, and why. Of course I personally love a lot of suspense in a mystery or good advice on how to avoid death

when indoor rock climbing (not that I've tried it), but too much cliffhanging (get it?) can actually turn me off.

*Charlotte stumbled through the gnarly woods, terrified and alone. She tripped again and this time turned her ankle and dropped the gun, which she saw tumble out of her reach. And she could hear it—snapping twigs and its heavy breathing gaining on her...*

*Let me reiterate for the umpteenth time the importance of being in proper physical condition with good-working equipment and essential training, and of course, you always have a lifeline and spotter and most importantly understand the significance of not trying to assault a level for which you are not prepared.*

**Item # 1 to think about for a minute (or several hours, if need be) how you could infuse a little humor into either of the above scenarios, without diminishing the seriousness of the situation.**

The next thing I did when thinking about my presentation was to Google “Humor in Writing” with no thought whatsoever of plagiarizing, mind you. I got all kinds of hits, many that talked about writing humor but gave examples of stand-up comedy or acerbic comments by celebrities or amusing anecdotes by public figures. One article cited over 30 “types” of humor, including bathroom and booger humor (apparently a big hit with kids). So, I did what I usually do when researching a topic and getting nowhere, I ignored everything and made up my own categories.

Here's what I came up with. During our break-out session, please feel free to come up with others! **(Item #2 to think about.)**

**Take That!** Lampoon, satire, wit, and sometimes snarky. An excellent way to surreptitiously stick it to someone who has made the world a worse place. Remember to put a disclaimer at the beginning of your book lest your old boss or ex recognizes his or herself. Think about this for fiction and non-fiction.

**What a Character**—The physical appearance, actions, dialogue, internal thoughts, etc. all help develop the character or personage. If we want a character to be clueless, loveable, annoying, witty, etc. they can help the reader get a handle on just who this person is. If you make a character or personage hilarious, outrageous, smug, insecure, etc., he or she will be a hit with the reader who will find the character, whether a major or minor player, unforgettable.

**My Bad**—Self-effacing humor. The character or personage is flawed (aren't we all?) and demonstrates a level of insecurity. The reader may be able to identify with the character's perceived shortcoming. It makes the reader feel good about being deficient in some way because it makes us human.

**If I do say so myself**--Self-enhancing. This character or personage probably takes a lot of selfies. Narcissistic know-it-alls that fancy themselves as the mentors of all humankind, and

possibly even those outside our universe. Not humble, even when being humble would be much more endearing than the bragging rights claimed by the character.

**That's Absurd!** Also maybe campy or hyperbolic. Something so ridiculous that readers will willingly go along for the ride down fantasy lane.

**Another one bites the dust!** Can be slapstick, or just a simple activity or event that creates humor, whether inflicted by nature, circumstance, situation, a person, an object, or the setting.

**Oh Look! A squirrel!**—Non-sequitur. Something significant is happening and one of the characters goes completely “off script” and launches into something irrelevant and unrelated.

**Dark and stormy (night/day/scene)** When a book is deeply disturbing and wrought with horrific things, we call it “dark.” Maybe in order to deal with the horror of something, the characters' mind takes on a kind of whimsical fantasy to escape the fact they are in deep doodoo.

**I can NOT catch a break!** Irony is so common in our everyday lives. Having a character experience a bit of humorous irony is a great tool for connecting with the readers. (They know exactly how it feels...) Isn't it great that our snowblower is finally fixed, now that it's summer.

**So, ya wanna piece of me?** Slice of life or amusing anecdotes. Often infused with a bit of embellishment to make it even better. *No matter how much I push the scale around the bathroom floor, it tells me that things are not as they used to be.*

And I'm sure you've figured out that humor can incorporate several of these categories simultaneously, along with actually keeping the story or information moving at a productive pace.

I'm going to bring some examples of humor in writing to the session. **PLEASE feel free to bring something to share, whether your own work or someone else's. (Of course you aren't required to do this, just encouraged.)**