Mini-Lesson B: Satire

Time Needed: 1-2 class periods depending on the activity options you choose

Objectives: Students will be able to...
- Describe the purpose and characteristics of satire
- Distinguish satire from misinformation
- Analyze satire to understand its humor and purpose

Materials: (optional but recommended)
- Web Activity link found on the teacher web page for this lesson
- Student internet access -OR- a classroom computer and projector with internet access

Handouts:
- Reading (1 page; class set)
- Practice Activity (1 page; class set)
- Independent Investigation (1 page; class set)

Fillable PDF handouts are available as an alternative to paper. Find them on the web page for this lesson.

Step by Step

☐ **ANTICIPATE** by asking students about the relationship between humor and news. Is the news ever supposed to be humorous? What about humor about the news? What examples have they seen?

☐ **DISTRIBUTE** the reading to the class.

☐ **READ** with the class, pausing to discuss. Alternatively, have students read in groups or independently.

☐ **DISTRIBUTE** the Practice Activity and review the directions as appropriate.

☐ **ALLOW** students time to complete the Practice Activity.

☐ **DISCUSS** the answers with the class for a deeper analysis of the material.

**INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION** (INDIVIDUAL OR WHOLE CLASS)

☐ **ARRANGE** for student online access -OR- set up a computer and projector in your classroom.

☐ **DISTRIBUTE** the Independent Investigation handout and review instructions as appropriate.

**WHOLE CLASS:**

☐ **DECIDE** beforehand on a satirical article to analyze with the class.

☐ **PROJECT** the article or copy it for students.

☐ **WORK THROUGH** the article and handout together as a class.

**INDIVIDUAL:**

☐ **ASSIGN** students to complete the Independent Investigation individually or in pairs.

☐ **DISCUSS** what students found and the answers they came up with.
Is It a Joke—Or Is the Joke on You?

Internet pranks and hoaxes are stories made up by people hoping to fool others into believing something that isn’t true—if nothing else, for as long as it takes to make money off the website traffic. But there’s another type of “joke” story that isn’t trying to fool anyone, and if you don’t want to be fooled, you need to be able to recognize it. These are satirical stories. **Satire** uses humor, sarcasm, ridicule, exaggeration, irony, or similar techniques to criticize or comment on current events, society, or other shared experiences. If you’ve ever seen a Saturday Night Live sketch, you’ve seen satire. On the internet, there are many well-known satirical websites. Most of the satire that gets shared is political, but lots of satire has nothing to do with politics. There’s tons of satire that pokes fun at “hipsters” or “rednecks,” for example.

The whole point of satire is to comment on shared experiences in a way that’s funny—**not** to trick people. But people can get fooled by satire because it’s often done in the form of a fictional news story. Satire always plays off some aspect of reality. That’s part of what makes it humorous. But the more subtle the humor or irony, the more easily it may go over some people’s heads. Also, unreliable news websites sometimes pick up stories from satirical sites and share them, either because they know the story will generate clicks or because they were fooled, too, and didn’t bother to fact-check.

**Written Political Cartoon?**

Satirical stories based on current events are a lot like political cartoons. Both satire and political cartoons often exaggerate certain characteristics of a public figure or a political party. Both can be very biting with their sarcasm, and both are done to make a point. In most cases, you won’t get the point or the humor unless you already know the real story the author or cartoonist is commenting on. Obviously, you wouldn’t rely on political cartoons as a source of news. Satire isn’t news, either. It’s someone making a statement **about** the news.

**Satire Sites**

To recognize satire, the first step is easy: Learn what the most popular satirical websites are so you’ll recognize them if someone shares a link. Then, visit these sites and become familiar with the way satire is presented. When you do this, you’ll notice differences. Some satirical sites use obviously photo-edited images or clearly humorous headlines with their stories. Others use exactly the same types of images you’d see on an actual news website and write with a style that sounds very newsy. These sites often use very “dry” humor or irony. And then there are sites that hide behind the “satire” label in order to spread misinformation. Watch out for these. Sites like this say their content is satirical, but their stories read more like plain, old made-up news. The only point of those sites is to make money off clicks.
Spot the Satire. The headlines below came from actual satirical stories on well-known satire websites. Along with each headline, you’ll see a summary of corresponding real-world issues or events. Pretend each headline is an inside joke you’re trying to explain to someone. What’s supposed to be funny? Why? Are there multiple angles to it? Explain as completely as you can.

1. “Cause For Concern: North Korea’s Weapons Division Has Been Microwaving The Same Potato For 36 Hours” (Clickhole, 4/4/17) During the first months of 2017, North Korea began testing more missiles than usual and making increased threats. It seemed as though North Korea may be about to develop a missile that could travel much longer distances than any of its existing missiles and could possibly hit the United States. North Korea’s government is considered a backward regime with an unstable leader.

2. “NASA Deploys Congressional Rover to Search for Funding” (The Onion, 9/2/15) Every year, the U.S. Congress passes a budget re-authorizing funding for government agencies like NASA. Space travel is expensive, and there is debate about how useful some NASA programs are, so NASA often faces possible or actual budget cuts. The Mars Rover has been one of NASA’s most successful projects and is being used to explore Mars.

3. “Sean Spicer begs Navy Reserve for multi-year deployment to anywhere remote” (DuffelBlog, 5/20/17) In May 2017, Sean Spicer had been the White House Press Secretary since the start of the Trump administration. It was his job to explain White House actions to the press, and he was widely ridiculed for his answers. The President’s own explanations on Twitter frequently made Spicer’s job more difficult. Spicer is also in the Navy Reserve.

4. “Weekend Forecast: Cloudy With High Chance Of Trump Tweetstorm” (The Babylon Bee, 6/8/17) This story was written the same day the Senate Intelligence Committee heard testimony from former FBI director James Comey. President Trump had fired Comey a month earlier. Comey offered potentially damaging information about Trump regarding an FBI investigation. Trump has been famous for his active Twitter account.
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Microwaving a potato can cause the potato to explode. The reference to North Korea microwaving a potato is a dig at the nation’s backwardness / lack of sophistication even as they are testing more advanced missiles. Microwaving the same potato for 36 hours is a play on North Korea’s advancement in explosive technology.

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This headline implies getting funding from Congress is as difficult a mission for NASA as exploring Mars. It’s funny because clearly an actual rover is not the right tool for the job in this case.

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The humor here comes from the implied desperation Spicer must be feeling to escape his job. This comes from his begging and by his wanting to go “anywhere remote.” Most people wouldn’t want to be sent just anywhere, nor would most military personnel request a multi-year deployment. It’s also humorous because it would be a drastic solution given that Spicer could have just quit if he’d wanted to.

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This one is partly funny because of the play on words with “Tweetstorm” and the weather. A “Tweetstorm” is an actual term used when someone fires off a lot of tweets in a row. It’s also funny because at the time it was written, everyone knew Trump wouldn’t be happy about Comey’s testimony, but Trump hadn’t reacted yet. Because of Trump’s history of using Twitter, people really were expecting a Tweetstorm that weekend.
INTERNET INVESTIGATION

1. Go online and find a satirical article that's about a current political or world event or issue. Write the home page address of the website where you found the article:

http://

2. How and where on the site does the organization disclose that its content is satire?

Name of website page:

What the site says about its content:

3. Write the headline of the story you chose:


4. Briefly explain the real-world issue or event that the story is related to:


5. Read the satirical story. What aspect(s) of the real-world situation is the story commenting on, and how? Is it poking fun? Being sarcastic? Making a ridiculous comparison? Something else? Explain it here:


6. How easily could someone be fooled by this story? Explain what might make someone think this is real and what clues indicate that is isn’t real.

Reasons someone might be fooled: Clues the story isn’t real: