Humor and technical communication: the culture, the texts, the implications

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Humor and technical communication:  
the culture, the texts, the implications

by

Kathleen Ann Hurley

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department:  English  
Major:  Rhetoric and Professional Communication

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In Charge of Major Work  
Signature was redacted for privacy.  
For the Major Department  
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For the Graduate College

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa  
1996
To Arlo,
for his patience,
his encouragement,
and his unfailing Irish wit,
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My thanks to all of you.
CHAPTER ONE: A DIRECTION FOR THE STUDY OF HUMOR AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Humor has rarely enjoyed prestige in formal language study. Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work will be explored in this dissertation, complains that the folklore of laughter and humor, "with all its variety and originality, remains almost entirely outside the sphere of research" (Rabelais 131).

Contemporary linguist Delia Chiaro contends that perhaps the lack of abundance of major works in the field could be due to the fact there is a widespread feeling that academic respectability is directly correlated to unenjoyable subject matter, thus the study of humor, by its very nature, cannot be taken seriously (1).

Even within the traditional and currently revised "canons" of literature, humor in the form of comedy is the stepchild of tragedy, and humor in the forms of jokes and witticisms are not "considered to be contexts of language use which may have 'literary' applications" (Carter x).

The first purpose of this introductory chapter is to discuss the limited attention given to humor in rhetoric and technical communication study, and the second purpose is to draw attention to current trends which indicate that this dismissive approach needs reconsideration. In the technical communication field, practitioners are actively producing intentionally humorous texts and discussing humor's use in their profession. In the field of rhetoric, theorists acknowledge that language use, including that of humor, is significant because it is implicated in what we can know and understand of the world, ourselves, and others. A continuing disregard of either current practice or discourse linked to
knowledge can only perpetuate limited understandings. The problem, of course, is where to begin in the neglected area of humor generally, in humor as rhetoric, and in humor in technical communication. My intent in this dissertation is to contribute to humor research generally by describing humor and developing a rhetorical approach useful for professional communicators. In other words, I intend to promote a position which has not yet been articulated in humor theory generally and which offers a useful starting point for examining humor in technical communication. My goal, therefore, is not the advancement of a general all-encompassing theory, but one suited to understanding humor in the workplace environments of professional communicators.

The third purpose of Chapter One is to sketch out the basis of that limited theory. My claim is that technical communicators can fruitfully understand and describe humor as contextualized social activity. To advance this position I offer a limited explanation in this chapter of what it currently means to discuss discourse in this manner, and I highlight the general direction research has taken in contemporary rhetoric and technical communication study. From the rhetorical stance I take, discourse is understood as part of a kairotic moment which is embedded within larger and more complex contexts of organizations and institutions or disciplinary fields.

The fourth and final purpose of this chapter is to outline the overall argument of this dissertation: that while an understanding of humor as contextualized social activity is valuable and is supported by humor research in diverse disciplines, current study both in rhetoric/technical
communication and in humor study is limited because it ignores the distinction between humor and serious and its attendant activities. And, in effect, ignoring the distinction allows for only a partial description of humor and of the interpretations participants make during a humorous exchange.

My argument is developed by reviewing current humor research which seems to assume humor operates as contextualized social activity (Chapter Two) but which also assumes a serious stance in interpreting and describing the humor. This is followed (Chapter Three) by an account of humor which distinguishes it from the serious and which offers a description and understanding from a humorous stance. In Chapter Four, I discuss the application of this adjusted rhetorical stance for technical communicators.

Humor -- the outcast in rhetoric and technical communication study

Studies in rhetoric and technical communication place humor outside the mainstream and sometimes minimize its importance and use. For example, Plato devotes little commentary to the laughable, although he does take time to condemn the comic and outlaw it from his ideal state. Only "slaves or hired aliens" may perform "ludicrous actions, and "no free person, whether woman or man, shall be found taking lessons" in humor (Laws 816e). Aristotle acknowledges in a few passages the power of humor as a rhetorical tool but restricts its use for the young.

And they (the young) are fond of laughter, and therefore witty, for wit is educated insolence ... the old are querulous, and neither witty nor fond of laughter .... Since all men are willing to listen to speeches which harmonize with their own character ... it is easy to see what language we must employ (Rhetoric 1389b-1390a).
Occasionally, rhetoricians develop extensive commentary on humor, but such works are anomalies and treated as such in contemporary texts on rhetoric. Cicero, for example, accounts for humor's use in oratory, its nature, and the appropriate time to use it, and George Campbell devotes an entire chapter to wit. But so little attention has been paid to humor that the authors of contemporary texts on rhetoric don't discuss the issue of humor and don't typically include the limited although relevant works. For example, in *The Rhetorical Tradition* by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzeberg, a currently popular and almost standard text for rhetoric, the authors provide selected segments of Cicero's *Of Oratory*, presumably to present a summary account of Cicero's views. Absent from the selection is a large segment of Book II which contains the discussion of wit by Caesar and Antonius. Similarly, while Bizzell and Herzeberg include segments from Book I of Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, they choose to delete, among other things, the second chapter of Book I which is devoted to wit, humor, and ridicule. Their selection of text segments cannot, I believe, be attributed to a conscious desire to remove discussions of humor from rhetoric; instead, their approach merely reflects a tradition in rhetoric which minimizes the importance of humor study.

Within technical communication, humor fares as poorly as in rhetoric. Some early 1900 handbooks on business writing, the precursors of technical writing texts, recommend an appeal to a sense of humor because if readers "can be made to smile, they will sign the checks" (Hotchkiss and Drew 224). But other texts of the times acknowledge that "deliberate fun is largely barred from business letters" (Cody 77). More contemporary texts in
technical communication typically ignore humor entirely (Houp, et al., Mathes and Stevenson, Kolin, Lannon, Alred, et al., Pearsall and Cunningham, Collins and Bosley, Sherman and Johnson). Steven Pauley and Daniel Riordan mention humor briefly in Technical Report Writing Today, but discount its usefulness in oral presentations in the workplace; "In industry or business, you do not need to begin your report with a humorous story, a quotation by an authority, or an anecdote" (360). Paul Anderson addresses the topic briefly, cautioning against the type of humor that relies on stereotypes because the jokes will tend to reinforce the stereotypes (256). A few recently published texts find a useful purpose for humor; most notable among these is Technical Communication by Mary Lay et al. in which "a sense of humor and playfulness," are viewed as a "legitimate tool to be used by skillful technical communicators" (132). But, in general, the commentary on humor in technical texts is limited and incomplete.

With neither rhetoric nor technical communication much concerned with humor, continued neglect toward the subject might be expected. Rhetoricians and textbook writers might continue to exclude humor from mainstream discussions, or, metaphorically, let the sleeping dog lie. However, necessity has a way of bringing to the forefront what has been slumbering and consequently ignored.

Practical considerations

Currently, two developments in technical communication and rhetoric have helped make discussions of humor seem more pressing. First, technical communicators are actively producing texts which incorporate
humor, and these professionals are engaged in sometimes heated debates concerning humor's place in technical communication; in other words, what hasn't been discussed rhetorically or described in technical communication texts is being practiced and debated professionally. Documents such as the AT&T quick reference guide incorporate cartoon telephones to illustrate and reemphasize proper placement of cordless phone equipment. A recent proposal for funding Internet training used a similar strategy, incorporating a Family Circus cartoon on the cover of the document (see Figures 1 and 2).

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Figure 1. An inside panel (top section) of an AT&T quick reference guide (About)
More subtle integrations of humor are being produced as well. For example, the following appears in the introductory section of the *Gateway 2000 486 Local Bus Computer System User's Guide*.

Unlike many electronics devices, your Gateway 2000 computer system was designed to be "worked on" by you, its owner. Whether you need to install additional options, change jumper or switch settings, or just want to admire the system, you can open the case without angering the gods of warranty (4-2).

And in a section on safety around equipment taken from an electronics manual, humorous asides such as the following occur regularly:

Persons testing this concept are limited to only one fatal shock per experiment.

Do not attempt to bypass or replace these devices with less protective devices unless you intend to become a statistic as you relive one of the disasters of history (*Electronic*).

Within computer systems themselves, such as the Macintosh System...
humor is being incorporated into the technical activity of manipulating the system. After opening the memory control panel, users hold down the option key as they pull down the pop-up hard-drive menu. But instead of seeing the names of hard drives attached to the Mac, users get a menu with the names of the virtual memory design team, including humorous hierarchical credits. Someone at Claris has even stashed an infamous, adults-only, Zebra Lady in MacPaint 2.0.¹

But the current practice of using humor in technical documents is only part of the overall picture of the activities of professional communicators. In addition to using humor in technical documents, technical writers and readers are actively engaged in formal and informal discussions concerning humor's incorporation into technical documents.

The 1994 National STC Conference held in Minneapolis offered a session entitled "Humor in Technical Communication? -- You've Got To Be Kidding." And while most conference presentations drew between 30 and 50 participants, this session on humor was attended by over 150 interested professionals. As an observer during the session, I noticed one striking aspect of the presentation; the presenters, Carolyn Watt and Mark Hanigan, began their presentation on the assumption that the audience needed to be converted to humor's use in technical documents. For the first 15 minutes of the hour-long session, they spoke of how humor can facilitate learning, increase productivity, and make individuals feel less threatened. They offered examples of their own experiences to illustrate how humor can help form friendly personal relationships with readers and to demonstrate their use of cartoons to grab the reader's attention.
The audience, though, began questioning the presenters about issues more typical of an already converted group of practitioners. Instead of debating Watt and Hanigan's stance that humor can be useful in technical texts, members of the audience related their own positive experiences with using humor in technical documents, and they wanted answers to questions such as the following: How do I convince my boss to let me use humor in technical documents? How do I find samples of texts with humor? How do I get relevant research that I can use and share with others? (So many audience members requested the names of research connected to humor issues discussed during the presentation that, at the end of the session, the two presenters told the audience they would send a bibliography of humor studies to those who gave them their names and addresses.)

My perception of the general mood of the group and their accepting stance toward humor in technical documentation was not an isolated reaction to the session. A group, which included Carolyn Watt, gathered after the presentation to discuss the session. Comments centered around the large number of humorous texts discussed and/or written by the professionals in the audience. Among the documents mentioned were the following: Richard's Guide to the Rabbit, a car manual on the Volkswagen; Payroll User Guide, written for a private business; the Silver Scanner II Handbook, winner of an STC award at the conference; How To Write A Computer Manual; Operation Chain Saw Redesign, a manual for a utility company nicknamed OSCAR; the more well-known Dummies manuals for computer users; and the car manuals in the Complete Idiot series. The after-the-session discussion group seemed overwhelmed that so many
communicators valued humor and were already using it in their texts.

Other types of discussions about humor among professional technical communicators are also taking place. The technical writing listserv, available to thousands of professional communicators, has been the site of some animated discussions during 1995. Sometimes these professionals seem to be simply asserting that they have a sense of humor by reporting on technical passages they found to be extremely funny. Two examples are included below.

Example 1

I found this in a safety precaution today. If you think it is humorous, you are as warped as I am!

"Prolonged contact with skin or saturated clothing could cause irritation and an allergic reaction to some people."

ps. My boss didn't see the humor. He must be having a hard day because I already "know" he's warped (Funkhauser).

Example 2

CAUTION--RISK OF FIRE
DO NOT OPERATE HEATER WITHOUT FEET ATTACHED IN CORRECT POSITION.

I, for one, always check the attachment of my feet! (Reply)

On other occasions, these practitioners are engaged in discussions which relate to the intentional use of humor in technical documents (as opposed to the preceding malapropisms). Some contributors to the listserv subtly discourage the use of humor.

Some people like humor in manuals. Some people like pineapple on pizza. The difference is you can't pluck the humor off the manual (Levinson).
Ironically, this contributor to the listserv concluded his message with this one-liner after his name and address.

If God intended one space between sentences, why do we have two thumbs? (Levinson)

Other contributors contend that the practitioners who are generally opposed to humor are taking the wrong approach.

Why do so many of us technical writers have to take ourselves so seriously? Because we can laugh at different aspects of our profession or of documentation, we aren't belittling technical writing, we're enjoying it (Vollbach).

These listserv discussions do not, however, only address general perceptions of humor in technical documentation. The conversations also have developed to the point that participants discuss specific situations for using humor and specific examples of their writing of humor in technical texts. For example, in a discussion of "nonsense text," Dave Taylor, a freelance technical writer, sent the following message. (The first paragraph is the listserv commentary to which Taylor is responding.)

(Listserv commentary)

David Dubin writes:
Another question fellow tech whirlers, do you have any feelings about the use of "nonsense text" to serve as text in an example. This is an example of nonsense text: In exum fuer des wagol, demp, unz framiz miqqel wodde inu bope parxc frow locqiet.

(Taylor's response)
I don't use nonsense text like your example (unless the client wants it), but my example text is often nonsensical. Examples are a good place to add a bit of humor to tech manuals. For example:

EXAMPLE MESSAGE
Bit bucket overflow . . . call housekeeping.

EXAMPLE MAILING LABEL
Kermit T. Batrachian
1019 Lily Pad Lane
And while the practices of professional communicators and their formal and informal inquiry into humor and technical documentation demonstrate one reason for needed research, another argument for study of this area is theoretical and stems from the beliefs many practitioners hold concerning communication and writing, that is, that "language creates doxa, which becomes the only truth we can know" (Gill 46).

Theoretical considerations

As Bruce Herzeberg contends, in his discussion of sophistic truth, "The power of language . . . is not limited to pity, fear, longing, or other emotions. It extends to knowledge" (39). That truth or knowledge "is not found but made" (48).

Many professional communicators believe that the making of that truth or knowledge is through the interactions of writers and readers within specific social groups. This view, generally referred to as a social perspective, assumes that

writing is potentially responsive to and dependent on everything that is on the social stage, everything we have put there through our complex history of civilization and everything we may not have made but that we have recognized and named as being there and thus have brought into our life activity (Bazerman ix).

The implication of the language-knowledge connection and the interconnections among writers, readers, and everything on the social stage is that what we can know and understand about ourselves, the world, and
others, is linked to our active language use.

To ignore humorous discourse in our studies is to limit not only what we can know and understand, but it is to disregard what may be different ways of experiencing and understanding a world we share with others. Kenneth Bruffee, whose seminal work brought social theory to the forefront, seemed to implicitly understand that in connecting our active language use to what we can understand and to the realities we know and accept, all discourse, even that which might be characterized as humorous, becomes significant in our research endeavors. Bruffee references and points specifically to the work of humor theorists Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay who analyze "scientific jokes, "proto-jokes," satire, and other forms of humor" in a scientific community (785).

Present humor scholarship connected to technical fields

With professional communicators using humor in technical documents and discussing the merits of humor in texts, and with a need to explore humor because such study can provide insight into how we know and understand ourselves, each other, and the world, we might anticipate that some scholarly work connecting humor and technical communication exists. And it does.

We have, for example, a collection of humorous essays, *A Stress Analysis of a Strapless Evening Gown and Other Essays for a Scientific Age*, written by scientists, engineers, academics, and technicians which spoofs several disciplines and their methods of operation. In addition to this collection, Philip Rubens provides an "overview of the application of
cartoons in technical information" (196). And Stephen P. Kauffman and Francis M. Dwyer add to the work on cartoons by conducting an experiment to compare the effectiveness of cartoons versus realistic photographs as complements to instructions presented in in-service training programs; their conclusion is that, generally, participants preferred instructions complemented by cartoons.

Some additional study has been conducted which relates to the work-life of a technical communicator. For example, Chris Kramer and Brian H. Kleiner claim that a lack of humor in the work environment leads to negative attitudes and impersonality, and they outline the physiological benefits of humor such as stress reduction, a drop in blood pressure, and an easing of tension among staff members. Steven Linstead argues that a study of humor in organizations helps expose myths of dominant ideologies and, in his study, he shows how the jokes used by employees can accommodate resistance to those dominant ideologies.

While the essays from the Stress Analyses collection are themselves humorous and approaches to or experiments with cartoons in technical texts are valuable indicators of an interest in the humor-technology connection, neither the essays nor the cartoon studies investigate the larger issue of humor. The studies which focus upon humor in workplace environments are important because they bring to the forefront what has been typically ignored in scholarly study. But these studies do not directly deal with technical communicators and the decisions communicators make to use or not use humor in technical texts.

Two research projects, focusing specifically upon technical texts and
communicators' use of humor, are currently underway though not yet published. One project examines the effects of the use of in-text humor in AIDS brochures given to college students (Opplinger and Jablonski). Another study identifies five types of humor (wit, puns, irony, self-deprecating, and humorous graphics) and asks participants to rate the level of appropriateness for these types of humor in different documents (Gardner).

Research such as this will be valuable in the technical communication field once it becomes publicly available and debated because the studies ask how the humor in a particular brochure was received by readers and what practitioners believe about humor's use in different types of technical texts. Such research has the potential to challenge the more generalized studies which argue communicators should not use humor in business environments (A Word) or those articles that give tips for doing so (Darby). But even the formal research studies now being conducted are not designed to answer a basic question that needs to be addressed in the unexplored territory of humor and technical communication.

The missing elements in contemporary scholarship

In conjunction with work which asks how or whether we should write humor, or what humor or humor text types are/are not acceptable, we need to ask how are we going to describe the concept of humor when we explore it in technical communication. The unpublished studies offer examples of texts which people may interpret as humorous, but they offer little in the way of describing and understanding humor itself. And approaches and
experiments with cartoons in technical texts can be informative, but what these studies focus upon is only connected loosely to humor. The cartoon takes center stage and humor is simply assumed.

This basic issue of describing humor is significant for initial inquiry into an unexplored area because it suggests that researchers describe the topic being addressed in a substantive, scholarly manner. In addition, a description of humor can help explain what we agree or disagree about when we discuss humor's use in technical communication. Presently, humor's use in technical documents is a debatable issue, and beginning our inquiry with a workable description of humor can help us understand our own perceptions in relationship to others' as we conduct our research. Initiating a discussion of humor and technical communication by describing humor in a particular manner can even help us develop diverse accounts of humor and articulate other areas of agreement and disagreement. While such a fundamental question might seem overwhelming as we open discussions about humor, the question can also press us to scrutinize our assumptions and develop strong research agendas. But how do we go about responding to this question?

A starting place for describing humor

Fortunately, the basic question I pose has already been addressed to some degree. Humor study has been an area of interest and research in a number of disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, anthropology, psychology, social-psychology, and organizational management. Accompanying the formal writings published in these fields are national and
international conferences on humor during which humor scholars report on contemporary trends, descriptions and uses of humor, and research directions.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming amount of already-conducted research leaves the technical communicators with a daunting challenge: to become familiar with past humor studies. Humor and technical communication is a relatively recent study area, and most practicing professionals have had limited exposure to the work in humor research. Mahadev Apte, a noted anthropologist who studies humor, recalls that in his initiation into the field of humor he was "not prepared for the diversity and variation" he "found in the literature on humor" (Disciplinary 8). Recounting his experiences in familiarizing himself with humor studies, Apte explains the dilemma he faced in the following way:

This meant gaining familiarity with the major issues involved in humor research through reading vast amounts of material, learning technical terms and concepts employed by scholars in disciplines ranging from literary criticism to ethology, and finally, trying to discern and understand the methodologies employed for investigating certain aspects of humor (Disciplinary 8).

Technical communicators, already part of a growing and changing field with which they must stay current, would seem to lack the time to read broadly into research in yet another area of study. Keeping abreast of technological changes in the form of new software and staying informed on shifts in theoretical discussions concerning how we communicate with one another are more than enough to fill the extra time of a practicing professional.

And yet, future technical communicators need to have a broad sense
of humor scholarship so that they may build upon rather than repeat existing research. With such a background, technical communicators may expand not only upon research in their own discipline but also enlarge the scope of past inquiry into humor study. Therefore, in Chapter Two, I provide a brief sketch of past approaches which seem to dominate humor scholarship to accommodate the needs of those unfamiliar with humor inquiry.

**Limiting the starting point of discussion**

My emphasis, however, is on those humor studies which seem to assume that humor needs to be described as part of contextualized social activity. I focus on this type of humor research because much of the current rhetoric/technical communication study makes a similar assumption about the study of discourse in general; that is, that descriptions and discussions of language need to be explored as part of the on-going activity of the participants who use the language at a particular moment. As such, the assumption of humor research which assumes a need for contextualization merges with concepts from current rhetoric/technical communication which are already familiar to writers and readers in the field.

I do not claim, in this endeavor, that my approach is necessarily better than other strategies might be. However, an approach which works from what we currently understand and debate in technical communication makes sense as we attempt to integrate the new and minimally discussed area of humor.
In addition, an approach which focuses upon humor as a contextualized social activity can provide an opportunity for different types of discussion in the area of humor research. At the present time, humor and technical communication has been addressed minimally. A few conference presenters at the 1995 International Humor Conference in Birmingham, England, addressed the topic of humor in some select texts which were developed within business environments. A social rhetoric such as the one I employ and tie to technical communication in my research has not, to my knowledge, been advanced or explored by any humor scholars.

**An overview of rhetoric as contextualized social activity**

The overview I present in this section is a base for the more specific approach I will develop in Chapters Two and Three to explore humor and technical communication as contextualized social activity. As such, this section describes my perceptions of the currently dominant discussion in technical communication and offers the starting point for defining my research approach.

A view of discourse as contextualized social activity makes the assumption that readers and writers are not providing private responses to a particular issue or moment, but that they filter texts through their prior experiences, and these experiences have profoundly social roots. In other words, to understand the meanings people make of their discourse requires a consideration of their social experiences or social activities with others. In addition, in order to understand the meanings people make of each other's texts, consideration needs to be made of the context in which conversations or discussions take place.
In rhetoric, the idea of context is closely connected to the classical Greek concept of *kairos*, the "proper measure" and "right timing" of which rhetors avail themselves when constructing their discourse (Kinneavy 85). The word takes its meaning from two sources; in archery, it represents the momentary opening for an arrow to find its mark. In weaves, it represents the moment when an opening in the loom allows the weaver to pass yarn through an available gap (White 13). Consequently, *kairos* consists of two metaphors, one temporal, the other spatial. As James Kinneavy points out, the analog in current rhetoric is situational context, which includes considerations of both time and place (83).

*Kairos* or situational context brings attention to the immediate moment of communication, situating it within a particular time and place. The social dimension of this communicative act in reading or in written communication is the interaction of two or more participants, the writers who construct and the readers who respond.

Technical communication and rhetorical studies often identify the time and place by assuming temporal and spatial elements for their research, and investigators focus upon workplace settings and organizations where technical communicators operate. The impetus for this type of research developed in the mid-1980s when Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami published *Writings in Nonacademic Settings*, and since that time, a legion of studies situate research into communication within organizations: a management consulting firm and an international accounting firm (Freed and Broadhead), an academic setting in which biologists write proposals (Meyer), a large corporation in which engineers write (Spilka), and an
auditor's firm (Hagge and Kostelnick).

An important aspect of these studies is that they situate the kairotic moment within the larger and more complex context of organizations and institutions or disciplinary fields. In addition, within these larger contexts, members share in social activity and build upon their shared prior experiences with others in their communications. This research has become so significant that the phrase "corporate cultures" has become commonplace and, in general terms, refers to shared and meaningful symbols which are manifested in values or beliefs, myths, and cultural artifacts. The rhetorical situation, then, is not simply an isolated moment a writer and reader share but a matrix of participants, activities, and artifacts embedded within a complex context of an organization's culture or a specific research site.

A few researchers have extended the concept of culture to include even larger entities such as societies and cultures. Charles Beck, for example, has developed a theoretical model of communication which identifies the "societal" contextual level as one which describes the wider cultural, ethnic, and national background within which the communication occur. This level includes the specific language used, the laws governing individuals and organizations, the economic and social conditions, and changing technology (138).

Charles Kostelnick, in a discussion of pictorial perception and knowledge, also recognizes a larger cultural context which "creates the widest social lens through which we read pictures" (245). Part of this cultural context is historical in the sense that viewers share experiences and thus a certain cultural knowledge at a certain historical moment (247). The kairotic moment of all professional communication is thus embedded within
organizations or institutions which are also part of larger societies and cultures.

My study here employs this view of communication as social activity embedded within multiple contexts: the immediate situation, the organization and its goals, and the larger society or culture. I do not assume, however, that a clear-cut distinction can be made among these contexts, or that it is possible or desirable to trace the webs of connections that might be made among these. I merely offer the preceding perceptions of the current technical communication as a view and as a base from which to begin describing humor.

The single task of merging humor study with the rhetoric of technical communication poses a fundamental problem that needs to be addressed in this study. The past research conducted which assumes a social and contextualized view of communication has been directed to investigations of "serious" discourse and not to humorous discourse. Because of this, current research necessarily makes assumptions about communication based on what the "serious" implies. It assumes, for example, that communication within an accounting firm is deeply embedded within the culture and activity of accounting firms which perform serious activities on behalf of the organization and its clients. This approach is not unreasonable; as Michael Mulkay, a noted sociologist examining humor and social structure observes, "the dominant position in our culture" is of the serious "mode of discourse which we use to create the serious world" (6).
Distinctions between humor and the serious

The problem is that humor is not the same as the serious, and even though most current research has not yet fully explored this issue, everyday experiences confirm the separation that is typically made of humor and the serious.4 For example, in routine conversations we place value judgments on jokes or situations that might be characterized as humorous by those participating. "Gee, that was funny." "Most hilarious joke I've heard." "That comment was not at all humorous!" We further extend these value judgments to humor itself, alternately, as technical communicators are now doing, condemning or praising humor's use in documents. We don't, however, comment in the same way about what we would characterize as the serious. We don't typically exclaim, "Gee, that was a relatively serious thing to say." or "That was not at all solemn," unless, of course, we're somehow making a humorous interpretation of an event. We also don't worry or criticize a serious approach in technical documents; it's what we assume and not something we find unusual or in need of defense.

An additional indicator of the separation of humor and the serious is that a distinct area of research, study, and reflection is devoted to humor. Aristotle and Plato separated the laughable from serious rhetoric over two thousand years ago, and that same approach is typical today. We have conferences devoted to humor and a distinct body of research, including my present study, which seeks to explain the unique characteristics of humor.

For the purposes of my study, the important consequence of the distinctions that have been made between humor and the serious is that when humor is contextualized to describe its characteristics, the social
context within which humor is placed becomes a critical consideration. In rhetoric/technical communication and humor research, the social context focuses on the values of organizations engaged in the serious work of the world. The result is that humor (which is not the same as the serious) gets described primarily from within serious perspectives and activities. The general idea of social activity and the spatial and temporal characteristics of context will be useful but, if humor and the serious are not the same, then the specific social activity of humor and its attendant kairotic situation, embedded within organizations and larger cultural values, may need separate description, a description suited not to the serious but to humor.

In other words, what I will be proposing is that within the research of rhetoric and technical communication, within kairotic situations, organizations, and societies, we need to make space for the social activities and cultures which are particularly suited to humor and which, I believe, operate simultaneously with the serious. And Mikhail Bakhtin provides the method for carving out the needed space.

Therefore, in Chapter Three, I intend to summarize Bakhtin's primary work on humor, *Rabelais and His World*, and draw from his writings the issues and ideas which seem relevant and appropriate for a description of humor and its unique social activity. In brief, I will suggest that, like Rabelais, who participated in and wrote about a rich folk humor culture, technical communicators routinely participate in a humor culture within the workplace. And in order to understand and describe humor in a substantive way, we first need to acknowledge the existence of an office-humor culture within the workplace. For technical communicators, this
humor culture partially consists of the social activities within offices which seem outside the official work of communicators and which has as its cultural artifacts the humorous texts which spread through offices, are pinned up on bulletin boards, and are reproduced and sent off to others in different businesses or institutions.

**Humor as a force of interruption**

But when humor moves into the serious world, as it did for Rabelais' critics and as it does for technical communicators, humor becomes a *force of interruption*. Therefore, we also need to acknowledge and examine the interruption of humor into the serious world by exploring the overlap and inter-mixing of the cultural artifacts.

However, Bakhtin was concerned not only with the texts or cultural artifacts of Rabelais and his world but also with the interpretations that were subsequently made by literary scholars of the humorous works. Bakhtin argued that the meanings made of Rabelais' work, which came from a humor culture, needed to be understood within the context of humor and the activity within which they developed. He further acknowledged that, even during Rabelais' time, the humorous and the serious intersected and overlapped.

The significance of Bakhtin's position is that locating a humorous text in a humor culture may produce interpretations distinct from those which would develop when the text is interpreted from a serious stance. In addition, because humor and the serious intersect, humor may become an interruptive interpretive element as well when technical communicators employ humor in technical texts.
To illustrate the two preceding conceptions of interruption, one on a textual level and one on an interpretive level, in Chapter Four I intend first to present a limited description of the cultural artifacts of the technical communicators' humor culture. Drawing upon samples of office humor, I will survey what seem to be the some of the major themes which have developed in this contemporary culture.

Once I have described some of the prominent themes, especially those which seem relevant to technical communicators, I will explore the textual interruption of humor into the serious world; that is, I intend to illustrate the overlap between the office-humor culture and current technical texts which incorporate humor. My intent throughout this component of the project is primarily to demonstrate the existence of a humor culture and the office-humor culture's interconnection with the humor that is currently produced in technical texts.

To demonstrate Bakhtin's position concerning the two different interpretive stances, the humorous and the serious, I intend to explicate a single example to demonstrate the potential of using a Bakhtinian approach to understand the interpretations that can be made of humor. In the extended example I present, the interruption of humor into the serious world resulted in a complex mixture of values and group affiliations.

Following this example, I will return to the general question I initially posed in this introductory chapter concerning the description technical communicators will give to humor as they begin their scholarly inquiry. I will address some of the difficulties and advantages of employing a Bakhtinian description of humor, and I will offer several suggestions for
technical communicators who may wish to pursue inquiry from the stance I develop or who wish to use humor in technical texts.

**Significance of this current study**

This approach of focusing on humor and its participants operating within multiple, simultaneously-existing contexts will not, of course, answer all questions about the uncharted territory of humor and technical communication. But the approach is at least an opening step in attempting to describe humor in technical communication in a specific manner and to account for the divergent positions practitioners now hold. My research has additional general significance for the fields of rhetoric, technical communication, and humor. Most studies in these three areas assume that context can be described as a unified, single concept; the time and place of investigation is the serious world of work. When we begin to examine the special contexts suitable for humor studies, we enlarge our range of research and our conceptions of situational context. In addition, researchers have not investigated multiple layers of context in terms of a world view, in this case a humorous culture operating within a serious culture. By exploring context as multi-faceted, i.e., consisting of overlapping and intersecting world views, we have the opportunity to further enlarge the view we have traditionally held of context, technical communication, and rhetoric.

My approach also allows for interdisciplinary studies. *Katros*, while signaling the immediate situation and time, is embedded within larger social contexts or organizations, as is evidenced in humor, rhetoric, and
technical communication research. In order to examine social situations as part of larger social settings, studies from sociology are incorporated to enhance explanations of humor. When even broader social contexts are explored, anthropological research provides additional explanations. This interdisciplinary approach, while not encompassing all potential disciplines, seems to provide the most fruitful connections for accomplishing what rhetoricians, technical communicators and humor theorists have recently called for: approaches which seek not to isolate but to integrate knowledge from different fields of study.

Besides, humor is too rich and too complex for any discipline to cope with adequately, and as Michael Mulkay points out, "we have more to gain than to lose by approaching this uncharted territory in a spirit of tolerant, yet rigorous, eclecticism" (3).
CHAPTER TWO: SO EXACTLY WHAT IS HUMOR: HUMOR FROM A SERIOUS STANCE

If you laugh all around him, tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you, and yours to your neighbor, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is a spirit of Humor that is moving you (Meredith 42).

George Meredith, the late 19th century English novelist who wrote the preceding passage, captures the complexity of attempting to discuss humor. According to Meredith, in the spirit of humor the humorist smacks as well as sympathizes, spares and shuns, and pities and exposes, and the first challenge for technical communicators who will be venturing into the uncharted territory of humor and professional writing will be to decide how to handle such a complex topic as humor and how to make their approach useful for the field.

Professional communicators can approach this task from two directions; they can ignore the complexity of humor and limit their initial exploration to draw upon a single explanation of humor that seems workable, and they can then appropriate the humor explanation for the discipline of technical communication. The few articles which have been written in relation to humor and the workplace seem to advance this position; the writers adopt a single function for humor and then apply it to the workplace. (These articles are specifically referenced in the next section of this chapter.) My first purpose in this chapter is to discuss and discourage this approach. My position is that this stance has limited value for the field of technical communication.

Instead, what I advocate in this chapter is a different direction, one
which helps account for the complexity of humor to which Meredith alludes. I develop a working account of humor based upon a social rhetoric which will acknowledge that humor may be described in complex and sometimes even contradictory ways. I accomplish this by drawing upon relevant humor research and, in the process, I identify several contextual elements from these studies which help explain humor and which may impact the interpretations made of it: humor stimuli, expectations, values, participant relationships and group relationships. This approach overcomes the disadvantages of the single explanation of humor perspective because it acknowledges that humor will have diverse functions. In addition, this social rhetoric helps explain why humor is interpreted in diverse ways by connecting the humor and the interpretations made to the contexts in which the humor is embedded.

My third purpose in this chapter, however, is to suggest that the research from which contextual elements (expectations, values, etc.) may be identified has, at this point in time, been limited in that the descriptions of the elements draw from what occurs in the serious world. And because humor and the serious are distinct, the research provides only a starting point for understanding interpretations made of a humorous conversation. (Distinctions between the serious and humor will be drawn out at the conclusion of this chapter and in Chapter Three). What I will advocate is that, in addition to the research developed from a serious world perspective, technical communicators need to explore an adjusted humor rhetoric which explains humor from a humorous stance, and the purpose of Chapter Three will be a further examination of this humorous perspective. What I
maintain throughout this dissertation is that technical communicators have a unique opportunity to draw upon present humor research and use it to understand humor (humor within the confines of non-humor). But they also have the potential to explore and think about humor and the interpretations that are made from an adjusted perspective that can be developed within the field of technical communication: humor within the contexts of humor.

The single explanation

"The accepted wisdom is that no single account could cover humor's diversity" (Morreall 179). John Morreall, writing in the mid 1990s, succinctly describes a point technical communicators need to consider as they read humor studies and as they begin to develop an understanding of humor within technical communication. Single descriptions of humor cannot be appropriated by professional writers and applied as a blanket to all communication situations because, inevitably, single descriptions won't always work. In addition to being a theoretically unsound approach, such a tactic may further reify the opinion that humor doesn't have a potential place in technical communication because humor doesn't accomplish what beginning researchers claimed it would.

Single descriptions of humor don't work because people make varied interpretations of the same text. For example, the following sentence is a popular one-liner which metaphorically compares a business operation in difficult straits to a sinking ship.

*The only difference between this place and the Titanic is they had a band.*
While this text may be amusing to frustrated employees within a business it may also incur the wrath of an owner who dislikes the suggestion that the business is worse off than the worst marine disaster of the 20th century.

The contradictory interpretations given to texts and thus to humor were acknowledged two thousand years ago by the Ancients. In discussions of the state of a person's mind while watching a comedy, Plato and Aristotle referred to the laughable phenomena as a dichotomous pain and pleasure combination. "We must once more divide, by bisection, if we mean to see that curious mixture of pleasure and pain that lies in the malice that goes with entertainment" (Philebus 49b). What the Classicists recognized was that while the comic and laughter were pleasurable and entertaining events, some of the humor and laughter could produce pain for a participant if the humor seemed directed against the person. For example, Aristophanes' Clouds pointedly ridicules Socrates and his "thinking shop" and, at the same time, the play was very popular entertainment for the general populace (Duckworth 20-21).

Throughout the history of humor research, humor has been viewed in multiple ways, and two of the currently popular drawn-upon conceptions are humor as superiority and humor as relief or release. The superiority approach generally holds that we laugh at the infirmities of others and, in the process, we make ourselves feel superior to others. In other words, we find pleasure in placing ourselves above others and their actions or even in seeing others suffer. Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century English political philosopher who is regularly referenced as a primary contributor to the superiority approach, terms "those grimaces called LAUGHTER" a sudden
glory, during which people apprehend "some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (36).³ Humor as relief or release is traditionally associated with Sigmund Freud who viewed humor as a "triumph of the pleasure principle" because it repudiated "the possibility of suffering."³ Humor was a "liberating element" (Humor 265) and one which contemporary researchers continue to explore in terms of relief or release, particularly from stress.³

What different descriptions of humor and its functions means for technical communicators evaluating humor research and developing their own research agendas is that the single theoretical accounts they read, while seemingly attractive, won't work all the time. For example, the currently popular description of humor as relief permeates the claims that are made of what humor can accomplish in workplace settings. Humor can improve "the overall health and well-being of employees. . . . Indeed, laughter on the job eases tension, creates bonds among staff members, and proves a gentler language for criticism and complaint" (Kramer and Kleiner 84).

However, while such a positive characterization of humor may appear useful this single explanation can not account for occasions when humor supposedly produces stress. For example, Harvey I. Saferstein, the president of the California Bar Association, recently claimed that humor, in the form of "mean-spirited lawyer jokes," drove a gunman to open fire in "a law firm, killing eight people before shooting himself--and leaving a letter that railed against lawyers and others involved in a failed real estate deal" (Nilsen, Alleen 928). Saferstein's point was that "jokes about lawyers could lead to
more violence like the massacre," and he wants such jokes eliminated (Nilsen, Alleen 928).

A few professional communicators, in their initial discussion of humor, are reflecting the same type of multiple views of humor. For example, in early 1995, discussion on the technical writing listserv concerned a Dilbert cartoon on technical writing which had been published nationally. Those who participated on the listserv engaged in lengthy debate concerning the cartoon and one listserv member finally conducted an informal study of the responses that had been given. "About half of you thought the cartoon wasn't funny, and about a fourth thought it was derisive of women and/or tech writers. The rest of you told me to lighten up" (Johnson).

Clearly, as technical communicators involve themselves in further discussions and in reading humor research to make sense of it for their own field, they will need to draw upon their present conversations and experiences: they will need to recognize that a single characterization or explanation of a joke or humor probably won't work; they will need to become familiar with a range of possible explanations people might make of humor, and they will have to accept that humor will be interpreted in diverse and sometimes opposing ways.

**Humor as chameleon**

Humor, therefore, needs to be characterized and thought of by writing professionals as having chameleon-like characteristics. As a chameleon whose skin color may be described at times as light brown, other times
slightly red, yellow, or even green, humor functions in multiple ways. However, the chameleon does not appear to change color whimsically but in an inter-relationship with the background upon which it is placed. Set on the bark of a dark tree, the chameleon appears brownish; placed in tall spring grasses, it looks green. In other words, the color taken on by the chameleon reflects and is part of the environment in which it lives.

The chameleon metaphor parallel in current rhetorical theory is that discourse, and in this case, humorous discourse, is interpreted in a particular way because language use and any interpretation made of language is intertwined with the surroundings or environment. In other words, while the chameleon rests upon and interacts with the colors of the foliage, a humorous exchange sits within a complex inter-relationship of the participants, the surrounding conversation, and the elements of the situation. (See Chapter One for a more complete account of rhetoric/technical communication which adopts this particular rhetorical research).

Drawing upon this powerful rhetoric, technical communicators can position themselves to use past humor research accounts and identify some of the elements which impact the interpretations made of a joke, cartoon, or anecdote. In effect, they can start to consider the elements which might impact different interpretations.¹¹

To simplify what I am about to embark upon, I will use, at the outset and as a limited example, a single humorous text. The following is an excuse note which was supposedly received by the secretary at the attendance office of a high school.
Please excuse Sandra from being absent yesterday. She was in bed with gramps.

The secretary read the note and burst into uproarious and appreciative laughter. The question is why in this instance does the secretary interpret the note in this manner?

Humor research has produced a number of possible responses to this question, and they include the following: the presence of humor stimuli, particular reader expectations, the values readers hold, and the participant and group relationships which develop prior to and during the reading of a humorous text.

**Humor stimuli**

One possibility, and the first to be explored in this section, is that individuals appreciate humor because the context in which individuals are embedded acts as a humor stimuli. The context in this case is the emotional state of the individual at the time. In humor research, scholars who take this approach maintain that particular humor stimuli may enhance or reduce humor enjoyment. (Technical communicators can identify this approach in their reading of research as studies of humor stimuli or what has been popularly referenced as arousal theory.)

For example, D.E. Berlyne, a major contributor to study in this area, proposed in the late 1960s and early 70s, that the sources of arousal for humor, humor stimuli, may include sexual, aggressive, or anxiety-inducing subject matter, as well as variables such as novelty and incongruity. Experimental studies conducted about the same time indicated that higher humor levels sometimes occurred after participants were aroused by anger (Strickland), when anxiety was introduced (Shurcliff) and when participants
were sexually aroused (Lamb).

When this approach is applied to the note the secretary received, the explanation of the secretary's interpretation of "in bed with gramps" might be the following. The secretary at the attendance office of a high school would typically be involved in a potentially stressful environment generally. Secretaries in high schools are often responsible for multiple early-morning tasks such as handling the sale of lunch tickets, collecting announcements to be read over the PA, and monitoring hall activity in front of the main office. In the midst of all of this activity, a secretary would be balancing the attendance ledger with the notes which were received, accounting for students who did not bring in notes, and determining who was and who was not attending school that particular day. In other words, the secretary's appreciation of the gramps excuse note would have been heightened because of the emotional state of anxiety of the secretary at the time. This surrounding context of the emotional state of the reader would have enhanced the humorous and laughable interpretation that was made.

Of course, this approach of using humor stimuli as an explanation of appreciative laughter doesn't always work. Such an approach is only one aspect of a situation, and the interpretations of actions which supposedly produced a particular stimuli seem to vary. As Mary Rothbart pointed out, an action designed, for example, as a friendly greeting and which should produce the stimuli of comfort is perceived differently depending on who offers the greeting and on the recipient. For example, the "same action performed by a stranger and a familiar person toward a child may in the former case lead to crying and distress, in the latter case to laughter" (40).
Mary Rothbart's observation of this phenomena in 1976 led her to conclude that "further information about the situation and state of the individual" may be necessary components in stimuli research (40).

Rothbart identifies three other factors here that technical communicators may consider as they attempt to explore possible interpretations of humor. She calls for further information about the state of the individual and further study of the situation. She suggests a third factor with the example she offers of the child and the stranger or familiar person; more attention needs to be given to the relationships that exist among those involved in any potentially humorous exchange (40).

**Expectations**

Humor research indicates that technical communicators may need to consider the "state of the individual" in more specific terms than that of the general surrounding conditions; specifically, an individual's state is also the expectation a reader brings to any interpretive moment. The studies which suggest this type of connection are rooted in assessments of humor as the perception of an incongruity. At its most basic level, a reader, such as the secretary, recognizes a juxtaposition; the secretary expects "cramps," reads "gramps," and laughs appreciatively. "People laugh when they discover an unexpected likeness between things that otherwise seem [and, in this particular case, I would maintain, are] unlike" (Holland 21). A student ill in bed with cramps is not the same as a student in bed with gramps.

Some researchers make additional claims. Nerhardt argues that the funniness of an event depends on the degree of divergence of an event from the expectation. In other words, the further away the two interpretation
possibilities are, the funnier. The secretary's interpretation might have been heightened by the disparity between the two readings.

**Values**

But the expectation element of incongruity is more complex than a momentary perception. Holland points out that these perceptions are also related to "our sense of values," or "ethical incongruities. This theory says we laugh when we see the incongruity between the noble and the contemptible, the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, the splendid and the scorned--finally, good and evil" (22).

This notion of an interconnection of values and humor perception can be seen in the value system a theorist endorses as well as in the approach to humor that is developed. For example, Plato was engaged in developing a political philosophy. He was primarily concerned with the rules of behavior appropriate for his ideal state. In the context of his discussion, humor and its participants could be banished for engaging in comedic acts if and when they did not fit the values (no comedy) he endorsed for that state. Plato's banishment of comedic acts is interconnected with the attitude he generally takes about comedy and humor; he connects it to evil. "Taking it generally it [the ridiculous] is a certain kind of badness, and it gets its name from a certain state of mind" (*Philebus* 48c).

Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is an example of how diverse interpretations are made of a work and how intertwined the commentary becomes in the values that are held. Erasmus' work was a theological treatise, written by Erasmus in the home of Thomas More to extol the value of Christian humanism and to discuss the conflict between piety and learning. As such,
the work should have raised little furor. But Erasmus' work is satirical, and he employs an exuberant, personified Folly to discuss, for example, the work of scholars at the time. Folly describes these scholars as a "tormented, calamity-ridden, God-forsaken body of men" (13). The reaction of scholars was not appreciative. As Johann Huizinga, a contemporary commentator on Erasmus' work, points out, Erasmus' "airy play . . . became too venturesome for many" (67). They viewed Erasmus' work as attacks upon themselves and upon the theological concepts to which they were committed. Even Erasmus' friend, Martin van Dorp "upbraided" Erasmus for "having made a mock of eternal life" (67).

The same type of interconnections among values and humor seem to be playing themselves out in current humor scholarship. Humor scholars discuss racist humor, ethnic humor, and feminist humor not simply as a way of categorizing different humor types but with an implicit acknowledgement that in our politically correct era, certain witticisms (or humor) may offend the sensibilities or values of a particular person or group. Bernard Saper points to what has become a commonplace method of introducing a joke in contemporary American society and the immediate reception many listeners give the joke-teller in response.

"Did you hear the one about the . . ."
"Hold on there! If it's not politically correct, I don't want to hear it."
(65)

As Saper contends, joke-telling in the United States has developed a kind of moral and intellectual standard, insisting that humor about minority cultures, religion, race, nationality, gender, sexual preference, or any sacrosanct idea or figure of speech, must conform to a particular code of correctness advocated by these special interest groups (65).
This interconnection of values and humor even includes what does and does not get published. For example, collaborators who produced a collection of humor samples indicated that the American standard of obscenity prevented them from publishing, with university or commercial presses, sixty to seventy texts because the material was "blatantly racist and sexist and in some cases . . . extremely crude" (Dundes and Pagter Never 8).

The values people hold, therefore, becomes another potential contextual element which could impact the interpretations made of a supposedly humorous story. These values, in conjunction with the humor stimuli and participant expectations which may be present in an interpretive moment, are, however, not the only elements which may operate in a given situation. A few humor researchers have also developed accounts of humor which indicate that participant relationships may impact humor and the interpretations that are made.\textsuperscript{13}

**Participant relationships**

Some humor scholarship suggests that these relationships may be built upon the prior experiences of the reader. As early as 1954, Peter Blau offered an examination of small groups of officials in two government agencies, focusing upon the inter-personal relations that developed in these formal organizations and exploring the ways these relations influenced operations. Similar prior experiences among group members helped explain the fact that the group could laugh and sympathize with the story-teller. The following account is the story Blau explores to develop his explanation of the humor and his suggestion that prior experiences played a role in the
humor which developed.

An interviewer within a government agency wrote an employment referral for a man, and then gave him a post card, telling him to drop the card into a box after he had spoken with the employer. This man came all the way from a suburb back to the office to find out into which box he should drop the card (109). The interviewer engages his colleagues in his account of this story and his colleagues explode with laughter. Amidst the laughter, one colleague remarks, "It sounds unbelievable," and another observes, "No, this happens; they do things like that" (109).

As Blau points out, the interviewer failed to specify mailbox, and this failure had caused the client unnecessary inconvenience: another trip downtown to find out which box to use. The interviewer tells his colleagues this story and elicits strong laughter in the retelling.

Blau explains that because the jokes told within these groups "tended to deal with generic client types, most members of the audience could remember some of their own clients who 'do things like that'" (110), suggesting that listeners sympathized with and understood the jokes built on their similar prior experiences with other clients. In addition, these shared prior experiences created a social cohesion within this particular group because it united the "group in the pleasant experience of laughing together" (110). While both joking and complaining resolved tensions within groups, Blau reported that joking did so more effectively, primarily because "listening to funny stories was intrinsically enjoyable, whereas listening to complaints was experienced as doing somebody a favor" (110).

Blau's commentary is significant because he highlights the
importance of the group members' shared experiences and the social cohesion which the joking provided the group. At the same time, he illustrates that social cohesion was already in place because the jokes that were told within these groups seemed to draw upon experiences that were similar for group members. One colleague comments "They do things like that" as an indication that such an experience is not unique to the storyteller. And, as Blau points out, the jokes dealt with generic client types, an indication that this group had developed a social cohesion through their experiences. In other words, the interplay between the humor and the context operated in two directions; joking may have developed a social cohesion, but cohesion already existed and was drawn upon in interpreting the joke.

Group relationships

Blau's study not only indicates the importance of the prior experiences of a participant but also the role that groups play in interpretation. Emil Draitser focuses more heavily upon group relationships in his study of Russian Jews during the 1970s and 80s within the hostile environment of the Soviet Union. Like Blau, Draitser illustrates that humor solidified the group, in this case, the Jewish "ingroup" that advocated the exodus of Jews from the state. But Draitser also demonstrates that groups and their humor can have significant power. In this case, Russian Jewish humor "assisted the Jewish ingroup in controlling the behavior of its members" (245).¹⁸

According to Draitser, the Jewish ingroup believed that "there was no other solution to the Jewish problems in Russia other than leaving it"
Folklore jokes, such as the following, reinforced the group's message.

Two Russian Jews are standing on a street corner talking. A third passes by and murmurs through the corner of his mouth. "I don't know what you are talking about, comrades, but yes, to leave is a must.

There are two kinds of Jews -- brave and insanely brave. The first kind leaves, the second stays.

What is a Jew of the year 1990? A Russian souvenir (251).

Draitser's primary point is that the ingroup's message was continually reinforced by the humor and positively impacted the decision group members made to leave the country. It's time to leave the Soviet Union because the environment is hostile to Jewish people; to stay is to die. (You'll be "a Russian souvenir."

The significance of research such as Blau's and Draitser's for technical communicators is that it suggests a need to explore the prior experiences of readers as well as the groups with which readers may identify. In addition, this research illustrates that the prior experiences, groups, and humor are connected to particular activities: Blau's group members worked with clients, and their experiences, social cohesion, and humor developed within the context of the work they performed. Draitser's Russian Jewish ingroup was involved in the social activity of surviving in a hostile environment and, for many, eventually leaving it.

The correlation for technical communication situations is that, potentially, readers of technical texts will be involved not only in the activity of reading documents but of other activities which are ongoing in a
given workplace. For example, the engineering activities at one site I studied were so intense, so fast-paced, and so stress-producing for the employees at that particular time of the year that it would be difficult to envision how a humorous text would have been interpreted. According to the manager of the division, humor didn't exist in that workplace at the time, although further study revealed that the manager did use humor in his communications with clients outside the engineering firm (Division). In another situation, an academic community of teaching assistants and the director of the program, some of the activities with which the group was engaged (after they had been together six months) were less frenetic and more people-centered, and an active humor culture developed within the group. Humorous exchanges became part of other activities of the group members, and some members developed humor in the technical reports they wrote and sent to others in the group. My suggestion here is not that a fast-paced environment discourages the use of humor, but that the on-going activities of any group at a particular time and the manner in which these activities take place may become important concerns for technical communicators.

Both Blau's and Draitser's studies deal with established groups, but group membership may also be temporary, a bonding which exists only for the duration of an activity. The existence of this type of group formation offers a great deal of potential for technical communicators because it suggests that interpretations made of humor are not solely tied to already-formed social groups. In other words, even during a stress-filled time, the engineers I just described could still potentially form a temporary group (and
one which includes humor) with a technical communicator for the duration of a specific activity. In fact, the division manager, who operated in the supposedly humorless engineering environment, forged a humor connection with clients of the business through the letters he and the clients exchanged.

This temporary group formation is alluded to by Norman Holland who conducted a study of a single individual's response to a set of humorous cartoons. In Holland's words, he and Ellen, his research subject, created a "potential space" into which she put her associations and my questions and interpretations. Ellen and I established a society of two in which we shared certain words and assumptions, although we each used them in our individual styles (194).

Rose Coser's study of hospital patients illustrates this type of temporary group formation, and she gives an account of the function humor played. Like Blau and Draitser, Coser found a strengthening of solidarity. When patients joined together in laughter they brought about a quick consensus which strengthened "the boundaries between the group of laughers and outsiders" (86).

The group of laughers were the patients, and the outsiders were the staff in charge of the patients' needs. During one humorous incident, hospital staff mixed up two women patients with the same name. A woman in the medical ward for treatment of high blood pressure was mistakenly taken from her room by an intern from surgery and "subjected to an elaborate physical examination in the surgical ward" (84). By the time the error was discovered, the woman being subjected to the exam was "raving mad and red as a beet" (84). Other patients who told and heard the story of the mix-up laughed uproariously with each other. The incident, according
to Coser,

touches on certain threatening aspects of hospital life, for these are fears, common to all, that some confusion in administering medication might occur. But by making the story seem funny, the storyteller implies that even if such fears were realized, even if the confusion occurred, it would have ridiculous rather than disastrous consequences. And the ridiculous victim ("red as a beet"), damaged in dignity, but not in body, proves that those fears were groundless (84).

As Coser points out, these patients had a commonality in that they were hospitalized together and supposedly shared a common fear of a hospital mix-up. Humor's function in this case is directly connected to the social, sometimes frightening hospital environment of the participants. And, in this case, humor acts as a sort of Freudian coping mechanism, but one directly intertwined and explained in terms of the situation under investigation.

Technical communicators might profit from Coser's study by focusing on the temporary bonds they could conceivably develop with readers of their technical texts which incorporate humor. Carolyn Watt, a technical communication consultant, created this type of social cohesion for a private firm that needed a policy and procedures manual. According to Watt, she developed a personal relationship with one of the employees, and, in ongoing conversations throughout the project, she and the employee developed a mutual enthusiasm for incorporating humor into the manual.

Summary

The first two purposes of this chapter have been to explore two directions professional communicators might take in initiating inquiry into humor and technical communication. One possible direction would be to advance and appropriate a single description of humor such as humor
provides relief from stress. Such an approach, however, has limited value because humor operates in multiple ways, and for technical communicators to adopt such a stance ignores the complexity of the topic and offers little potential to explain what may be occurring in a given interpretive moment. Instead, what I have argued for throughout this first section of the chapter is a direction which acknowledges that multiple descriptions will be made of humor and, in an attempt to understand what is occurring to account for these multiple descriptions, I have pointed to contextual elements which may impact the interpretations that are made. I have maintained that technical communicators will need to consider the potential readers' emotional state, readers' expectations, values, relationships, and group affiliations, both those in place at the time and those which may develop. They will need to consider these elements not in isolation but as they interact with each other in particular situations. Such an approach, which is supported and illustrated by humor research and the current social rhetoric, should assist technical communicators in making assessments of how a humorous text they write might be interpreted. This approach also gives direction to the types of research professional writers may need to examine, and it gives writers the beginnings of a research agenda they might develop for their field.

**The next step: broadening the rhetorical stance**

However, the primary focus of the social rhetoric and humor research referenced in the previous section, while providing a worthwhile starting point for initial inquiry, has a significant limitation in that the focus relies
upon the descriptions of elements and issues suited to a serious world, and these descriptions and the rhetorical stance may not be complete for discussions of humor. I will develop the idea of an adjusted humor rhetoric more completely in Chapter Three, but at this concluding point in Chapter Two, I present a description of the “serious” world I referenced earlier.

The “serious” world is the non-laughable world in which people exist most of the time. We don't typically wake up in the morning and roll out of bed laughing. We don't, and probably couldn't, eat breakfast while enveloped in gales of laughter. We typically don't engage in the activities of the day chuckling as we work. In other words, we operate in the serious world most of the time.

The serious world so dominates our existence that we rarely think about it, and the discourse it includes covers a wide range. "It can equally well refer to a squabble between neighbors as to a debate among physicists; it includes professions of love as well as of hate; and even academic analyses of humour come with its scope" (Mulkay 22). For technical communicators, the serious world is their work: the projects in which they are involved, their interactions with colleagues, their communications.

Technical communicators generally believe, as other professionals do, that within their serious world, clear, logical means exist to accomplish specific tasks. For example, a technical communicator who begins to write an internal policy and procedures manual assumes a beginning place for the project, perhaps reviewing past manuals. The next step is continued review coupled with writing. The final step is the physical production and reproduction of the text. For the technical communicator, this orderly
process is part of the work of documentation.

Technical communicators involved in revising a document believe that following such a process and continually working with a text will produce clarity and a sound progression of ideas. This revision work might include talking with other colleagues, making editing changes, or reconceptualizing the entire manual. But the assumption behind all of this work is that sustained revision will result in a more coherent, understandable, and usable text. In other words, the serious world of work of technical communicators is defined by the way communicators view their work and the processes in which they engage to accomplish their tasks. And the way communicators accomplish tasks is in an orderly manner, at least as orderly a manner as a hectic workplace environment allows.

Yet most workplace environments for communicators are not as orderly as the processes which I just described. Professional writers must typically balance their tasks to accommodate other activities such as unscheduled meetings or phone calls. As such, communicators participate in environments that are not always conducive to sustained progression on any single activity, and the result can be frustration or irritation when projects get delayed because of these other activities which impinge upon a communicator's time. The serious world of the technical communicator thus contains order and disorder; the attitudes and methods professional writers bring to their work is logical and progress-oriented while the environment in which they work to accomplish their tasks may be disordered.

Humor research and studies from current social rhetoric routinely
position themselves only within this serious world. They take as their loci of study the sites within which serious activity occurs. Blau, for example, selects two government agencies. Draitser deals with the political confines of the Soviet Union. Coser explores a hospital setting. The groups under investigation are those which typically operate in the serious world as well. Blau's group is part of an administrative government agency; Draitser's group has religious and ethnic ties.

The activities within these sites typify the work of the serious world. The government official who misdirected the client by not explaining the location of the proper box was engaged in the work of processing clients. The Russian Jewish people were engaged in activities which focused upon their physical movement from an unsafe place to one of safety.

The types of issues which are addressed in humor research further suggest that scholars assume a serious world context. For example, the typical types of humor stimuli which have been identified and researched are elements which characterize non-laughable situations; fear and anxiety are not typically associated with appreciative laughter. Instead, fear, frustration, and anxiety are elements which would characterize hectic workplace environments. Admittedly, D.E. Berlyne acknowledges that novelty may also act as a humor stimuli, but research into this element has only been suggested and not explored thoroughly or in contextualized research.

Because humor research positions itself within the serious world and its groups and activities, it sets in motion a course in which the possible connections that researchers make must also draw from the serious world.
As an example, a potential research site might be an engineer's workplace. The engineer might be engrossed, in this imagined scenario, in reading a software manual and using it to try to run an AutoCad program on the monitor.

The engineer, working within the serious context assumes that the text has an order to it that is characteristic of other software texts, and that, by reading through the text, progress will be made in operating the AutoCad system. The engineer now encounters a humorous passage, stops working, and laughs appreciatively. The researcher's task is to explain humor and its functions.

Because of the interconnections among contexts and humor, the researcher is obliged to explain the humor as part of the ongoing situation of the engineer reading and working on the system. And when the activity is situated in the serious world, the researcher draws upon elements within that serious world. In a sense, research in a serious site concerning serious activity is self-fulfilling in that the humor will be intertwined and explained in terms of the serious in which it is embedded. The result is that such research can explain a great deal about serious activity, and such explanations will be important for technical communicators because writers operate within a serious world.

But this approach is limiting in what it can explain about humor because it interprets humor only from a serious stance. And, as the next chapter demonstrates, humor is not the same as the serious.

Humor can also be explored as it operates freely within a humor context, one in which technical communicators function on a regular basis
and one upon which they can draw to not only understand humor in a more complete way but also to develop technical texts and conduct future research inquiry.
CHAPTER THREE: AN ADJUSTED HUMOR RHETORIC

Current rhetoric/technical communication and humor studies can explain why humor is described in such diverse ways; humor and the interpretations made of it are always part of the context within which the discourse occurs. However, humor scholarship also acknowledges that humor is not the same as the serious, and the first section of Chapter Three overviews the distinctions that have been made between the two.

For the purposes of my study which approaches humor as a social, contextualized activity, the most important distinctions between humor and the serious rest in the social activities in which each discourse, humor and the serious, takes place. The second section of this chapter addresses these distinctions by engaging the work of Michael Mulkay, 20th century sociologist, and Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian linguist and philosopher writing in the 1920s and 30s, both of whom discuss humor contexts and activities.

The work of Mikhail Bakhtin will become the focus of the third section of this chapter because Bakhtin extends Mulkay’s perceptions by providing an extended example; he contextualizes the writings of Rabelais within the humor activity of his time. And, in so doing, Bakhtin suggests a humor culture which operates simultaneously with the serious, and he provides a way to describe the contextual elements which are part of humor and its activity. In brief, according to Bakhtin, the values, expectations, and participant and group relationships which form in a humor culture differ from those that operate from within a contemporary “serious” world. These contextualized elements within a humor culture are tied to a
laughable point of view of the world, to values such as freedom and celebration, and to equality in the relationships among participants.

Finally, although humor and its activity are describably distinct from the serious and its activity, humor cultures and serious cultures potentially operate simultaneously and, from within the serious world of work, humor may operate as an interruptive force. This element of humor as an interruption will be the final focus of discussion in the chapter.

The overall significance of this chapter is that the description of a humor culture can provide an adjusted rhetoric of humor. This adjusted rhetoric can, in turn, direct technical communicators and humor scholars to a broadened, more sophisticated view of humor, and one which will be more useful than the current perspective of humor from a serious stance which permeates the current field of humor inquiry.

Distinctions between humor and the serious

Humor scholars have made distinctions between humor and the serious since the Ancients separated comedy (and by association humor) from tragedy.14 Literary theorists of the early twentieth century such as Henri Bergson continue to make a special place for humor which is removed from that which is typically associated with the serious world. Bergson associates humor with the ideal and with what is unreal. Humor is a pretense; it is "when we state what ought to be done and pretend to believe that is just what ought to be done" (143).

In other disciplinary fields, additional distinctions between humor and the serious are made. For example, Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay,
sociologists conducting research in the mid 1980s, view the humorous and the serious as different repertoires.

Much humour seems to depend on precisely the intimate juxtaposition of, and sudden movement between divergent interpretative frameworks. We would expect, therefore, that, in constructing humorous incongruity, participants will often draw on recurrent interpretative repertoires which are normally kept apart (174).

In their exploration of the discourse of scientists, Gilbert and Mulkay claim that scientists employ these different repertoires at different times to construct their social world.

For example, Gilbert and Mulkay present the following example of conversation to illustrate the "discrete interpretative repertoires" (one serious and the other humorous) employed by a particular group of scientists (174).

1 There are lots of things you have to take into account. 2 And there are very strong individuals in the field who want to interpret everything in terms of their theories. 3 Of course, those are the other guys, not us. 4 We're interpreting it even, balanced [general laughter]. 5 The other ones are the ones who are doing that. 6 When you try and bend the data like that sometimes you don't take into account everything too. [Hargreaves, 51] (174).

In the preceding passage, the speaker changed the tone of voice in sentences three to five and, as the speaker changed the style of delivery, "he suddenly switches from a straightforward, internally consistent account of error in asymmetrical empiricist terms into a different interpretative framework" (174). The characteristic of the "different interpretative framework" which is the humor, is that the scientists who were listening could discount the speaker's remarks in lines 3 to 5 as inconsequential. Thus the value that Gilbert and Mulkay see in humor is that, because humor is part of a
discrete interpretive framework, scientists can make a claim and then withdraw the claim if it meets too much resistance.

But while Bergson and Gilbert and Mulkay make distinctions between humor and the serious, a complex interplay also exists between the two. In effect, while humor and the serious are describably "discrete," they may also be dependent upon each other, a point Arthur Koestler seems to suggest, and an issue I will explore in more depth in the last section of this chapter. In his influential work, *The Art of Creation*, 1964, Koestler explains the distinction between humor and the serious by positioning humor at the juncture of different interpretive frames. And, as the following example illustrates, the two interpretive frames (labeled 1 and 2 in the following example) are serious interpretations based upon the events in a serious world.

(1) It sure is difficult to get gas during this shortage.
(2) That's why there's one thing I like about golf more and more. I can get out on the course, drive all day, and not once worry about gas.

The point of humor is the combination of the two seemingly unrelated ideas. In other words, a reader of the preceding example would be traveling down what Koestler refers to as a "train of thought" in reading the first line about the gas shortage. The second "train of thought" the reader travels would be part of reading the second line, the pleasure of golf. The point of humor, contained in the final line, is the convergence of the two tracks, the combination of two seemingly unrelated interpretive frames. The impact of Koestler's 'bisociation' explanation is that humor appears to rest, waiting to appear when disjuncture occurs. But at the same time, the humor taken from the final line is dependent upon the interpretations made in the first
two lines.

Koestler is not the only theorist to suggest humor as a moment of disjuncture. Past explanations of humor, described in Chapter Two, note this same type of juxtapositioning. Incongruity is a perception of contrasts; relief or release theories are a shift in anticipated psychic energy; superiority approaches are a moment of one person's ascendance over another.

The scholarship which acknowledges a distinction between humor and the serious and the interdependence of one upon the other is significant because it opens up the possibility that such distinctions and interdependence may be made in unexplored areas such as the context and activity within which humor and the serious are embedded. Michael Mulkay and Mikhail Bakhtin can help clarify the distinctions and the overlap of the humorous and the serious from the vantage point of humor as contextualized discourse and activity.

**Humor contexts and serious contexts**

Mulkay begins to suggest the importance of the context of humor by making an assessment of the following joke.

*What do you get if you cross an elephant with a fish? Swimming trunks* (17).

Mulkay maintains that "humorous and serious discourse operate according to fundamentally different principles" (7). Each discourse has different "plausibility requirements" (17). Thus, as in the elephant-swimming trunks-joke, the humor can be utterly implausible, and anything might be possible; swimming trunks might indeed be the result of the breeding of
elephants and fish. And, as Mulkay, points out, listeners don't typically complain that they did not comprehend "the idea of interbreeding elephants with fish" (18).

However, Mulkay's reason that people understand and accept the implausible is most important because he connects the discourse and the acceptance to the potential contexts in which the joke is interpreted. According to Mulkay, listeners don't complain about the idea of "interbreeding elephants with fish" because "presumably ... this is not the discourse of a biology seminar, where such an unlikely notion would be quickly noted and corrected" (18). And while Mulkay does not explore in any detail the significance of the context on the humor, he does imply that the same swimming trunks joke would be interpreted differently in a different social setting: scientists at a biology seminar would quickly note and correct the implausible; outside the context of this seminar, in an unnamed and unspecified situation, the reaction would be acceptance of the illogical. (In this case, interpretations of the humor and its implausibility also depend upon an understanding of the scientific concepts of breeding which are part of the serious world. But since Mulkay does not specifically deal with the overlap of the serious and the humorous, I reserve, until later in the chapter, further discussion of this point.)

Mulkay takes the idea of context a step further by exploring humor in diverse social structures, and through this process he identifies particular types of events which are more open and characteristic of humor than of the serious.

Mulkay argues that "we must focus upon the organized patterns of
discourse which are characteristics of different social settings, and we must examine how contradictory patterns are generated and handled by participants within these different settings" (158). In an attempt to look at several diverse social settings, Mulkay examines a spectrum of settings which range from formal, ritualized settings such as a wedding, to less formal rituals such as the Nobel award ceremonies, to Rose Coser's hospital setting (partially discussed in Chapter Two), to unstructured situations such as a dinner party (research conducted by Deborah Tannen in 1984 of conversation among friends during a Thanksgiving dinner party).

His conclusions indicate that humor thrives in some types of social activities and not in others. In highly formalized rituals such as a wedding, "as long as participants make no mistakes, humour is impossible. It is excluded by the rigid formality of the discourse" (158). Little humour exists during the Nobel ceremony which awards prizes, and that which occurs is "a temporary pretense of criticism that is reinterpreted subsequently and used as the basis for a conventional allocation of praise to science and scientists" (163).

Mulkay offers the following example to demonstrate how, even when an occasional humorous moment occurs during the Nobel ceremony, the humor is primarily the "basis for a conventional allocation of praise."

During the 1979 Nobel ceremonies in Stockholm, a representative of the students of Stockholm delivered the opening speech.

Scientific research has old traditions. Throughout the ages, man has striven to gain new knowledge, searched for new paths to follow. To many people, Christopher Columbus is an early and worthy exponent of this tradition. When he set off for America, he didn't know where he was going. When he reached that continent, he didn't know where he was. And safely back in Europe again, he didn't know where he
had been. And as if this wasn’t enough, he did not even travel at his own expense! This is very often the dilemma in which science finds itself. (Les Prix Nobel, 1979, p. 43) (163).

As Mulkay points out, a literal reading of this opening remark suggests strong criticism of Columbus and draws “attention to certain limitations of the enterprise of scientific research” (163). But as the student continues her address, she interprets the Columbus joke and “draws an analog between Columbus’ wanderings and the unpredictable explorations of free and independent basic research” (163).

Often, scientific progress has been the result of less specific basic research. At the same time, it is difficult to combine free and independent research with the demands that may be placed upon this activity by providers of research funds . . . The freedom of the scientist is being curtailed in many parts of the world. If Columbus had been fitted out for a voyage to Cyprus by his patroness, probably not even he would have reached North America! . . . In a democratic society, free and independent research will always benefit all mankind. (Les Prix Nobel, 1979, p. 43) (163).

The impact of the student’s subsequent remarks is that the humor in the Columbus tale is turned away from potential criticism to a “glowing compliment” to science (163). And in positioning science and scientists as the recipients of this praise, the student endorses “the pattern already implicit in much of what laureates themselves say. Within the Nobel ceremony, as within any highly structured situation, humour is inevitably restricted in this way” (164).

Mulkay also explores the less formal setting of Rose Coser’s hospital staff where the disruptive potential of humour may appear to be greater. However, in situations where there is a formal hierarchy and where
proceedings are guided by participants occupying positions of authority, it seems likely that humour will be employed routinely to support the authority structure, in a way which maintains the dominant social pattern (169).

In other words, Mulkay found that in both the Nobel and the hospital setting, humor was "never employed to challenge the dominant social pattern" (168). In addition, the frequency with which the humor occurred was limited in the sense that it had to meet the requirements of the authority structures that were in place.

However, in informal settings, such as the dinner party, there tends to be much more pure humour, which seems to be generated for its own sake and makes no direct contribution to serious interactional work. The pursuit of pure humour is more prominent in informal settings because there are few direct structural constraints on participants' discourse (170).

Mulkay's work is significant not only because he has produced a range of examples of humor-social structure interaction but because he has begun to identify particular types of social activities in which humor seems to thrive - the informal dinner party, where no "serious" interactional work occurs, and where pure humour (humor for its own sake) is prominent. It is important at this point to emphasize that in the study Mulkay describes, humor thrives where it is unencumbered by issues which dominate a serious world and its activity. The humor of the dinner party did not become mingled with issues of hierarchy and authority or ceremonial proscription, although Mulkay points out that the humor did revolve around the social roles that were assumed. Steve, the host, for example, "persistently adopted the humorous mode when he was speaking as host" (171). But even within this role, Steve was able to direct the proceedings in
a way "which fostered amusement and which was accepted, on the whole, as an expression of good fellowship" (171). In addition, the description of humor at the dinner party, where humor thrived, was decidedly positive, at times whimsical, and as Mulkay notes "plain silly" (172). The humor included discussions of the Pope's nose and smoking after sex.

At one point in the dinner party, one of the guests, David, spoke of an organization called NORCLOD (Northern California Lovers of the Deaf) that he and his friends had invented. David's fantasy was taken up and elaborated on by other guests such as in the following fragment (172).

David: umm . . . and . . . um at the way we were gonna have the uh the officers of the organization the higher up you go . . . the more hearing people there would be and then the . . . the . . . the: chairperson of the organization was gonna be a hearing person.

Deborah: That didn't know sign language.


The wedding, and, in a more limited sense, the Nobel ceremonies and the hospital, however, are activities which have developed within the serious world to accomplish specific functions and to accommodate the work of the world. Marriage ceremonies are institutionalized events which are part of and which carry significance to other events in the serious world; marital status has implications for insurance rates, for income tax, and for inheritance laws. Nobel awards acknowledge particular achievements, advances in knowledge, and are implicated in other serious activities such as tenure and promotion, economic rewards, and public recognition. Hospitals provide care for those who are ill, and the success or failure of the diagnosis and treatments they deliver have repercussions on their patients'
abilities to return to work, to pay their insurance rates, to work for the Nobel prize, etc. When humor operates in these social situations and within these structures, humor does not thrive as at the dinner party but usually becomes a sporadic event which takes on the characteristics which typify and reflect issues in the serious world.

Mulkay's comparative research, then, not only recognizes that humor and the serious are describably distinct, but his explorations also begin to associate humor with particular activities to which humor is most suited. Mikhail Bakhtin more fully expands the ideas Mulkay develops, and the next section will provide a more complete picture of the serious and humorous worlds, the activities and descriptions of humor within each, and points of intersection of humor and the serious.

In brief, the world of humor, according to Bakhtin, is marked by the following types of characteristics: a laughable point of view of the world; social activity tied to laughter; informality; festivity; life-affirmation tied to the relationships among human beings; and equal relationships among participants. The world of the serious, according to Bakhtin, is characterized in a descriptively different manner; a perspective of the world closely associated with the serious activity and work of the world; a corresponding cautious approach toward humor; lack of celebration; limited participation by human beings; and unequal relationships among participants. To describe Bakhtin's position more completely, I will summarize his discussion of Rabelais and His World to draw out more carefully the distinctions he makes between the serious world and the world of humor. In the concluding section of this chapter, I will relate these
distinctions more directly to the types of research which have been conducted, the possibilities for new research areas (where humor thrives), and to the contemporary culture and the workplaces of technical communicators.

I provide a more extensive and contextualized discussion for Bakhtin than I provide for other theorists. I have taken this approach because Bakhtin is not typically referenced in inter-disciplinary humor research, and his work may be new to some humor scholars. In addition, even some literary theorists who are aware of Bakhtin's general positions may be unfamiliar with his work on Rabelais, and I draw heavily upon Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* for my analysis. In addition, a more contextualized discussion of Bakhtin's work not only provides necessary background, but may also raise issues I do not address and which may further the understandings other researchers can bring to Bakhtin and to humor study.

*Rabelais and His World* -- Bakhtin and Rabelais

Bakhtin's position concerning communication and research fit comfortably within the preceding rhetoric/technical communication and humor emphasis. As a Russian linguist in the first part of the twentieth century, Bakhtin opposed the tenets of Russian formalism which sought to understand language as a "closed artistic construction" (*The Formal* 83). For Bakhtin, language and utterance were communicative and "oriented on intercourse, on the hearer, on the reader, in a word, on another person, on social intercourse of any kind whatever." He explained that to understand
communication requires keeping in mind "all the social characteristics of
the communicating groups and all the concrete complexity of the ideological
horizon--concepts, beliefs, customs, etc--within which each practical
utterance is formed" (The Formal 93-94). Bakhtin also acknowledges that in
spite of the fact that communicating groups and their concepts and beliefs
form complex relationships, an object of study can be isolated within
correctly established boundaries as long as "these boundaries do not sever
the object from vital connections with other objects, connections without
which it becomes unintelligible" (The Formal 77).

Bakhtin, however, expands present rhetoric/technical communication
and humor research because he enlarges the descriptive pictures we
currently have of the worlds of humor and the serious. And he does so
within the context of a social rhetoric which, therefore, describes more
completely the activities and contexts suited to each. Indirectly, Bakhtin
also allows future researchers to challenge the tacit assumptions they hold
regarding research, because most humor and rhetoric/technical
communication study stems from the world of the serious and thus provides
only one perspective on a description of humor.

In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin examines the writings of
Francoise Rabelais, whose works about Pantagruel and Gargantua are
fictional histories, or, as Rabelais calls them "merry new chronicles." The
texts are ostensibly about giants, although their size varies from 100 feet to
over 1,000 miles, and, sometimes, such as in Book 1, the later chapters
don't make the characters appear to be giants at all (Frame xxviii). What
has been of significant interest to some literary scholars are the Rabelaisian
images which deal with, among other things, the lower body, copulation, food, digestion, and healthy (or unhealthy, depending upon the scholar) eliminations such as bowel movements.

The examination of such Rabelaisian images are beyond the specific scope of my study here; however, Bakhtin's theoretical position, which he uses in part to defend the images in Rabelais' writings, can make a substantial contribution to understanding and describing humor from a serious as well as a humorous perspective within the technical communication field.

*Rabelais and His World -- Interpretations by Rabelais' contemporaries*

Bakhtin believes that Rabelais' contemporaries understood his world of giants and his humor because they saw his work as part of a tradition of laughter and its social activity. Furthermore, Bakhtin contends that subsequent assessments of Rabelais' writings, by literary scholars, are generally misguided because they interpret Rabelais' images from outside the realm of the humorous carnival tradition.

Rabelais' contemporaries saw his work against the background of a living and still powerful tradition. They could be impressed by the mighty character and success of this work but not by his style and images. They also vividly felt the link of Rabelais' imagery with the forms of folk spectacle, the festivity of these images, the carnival atmosphere which deeply penetrated their sphere. This is the essential difference in the appreciation of Rabelais' writings in the sixteenth century and in the years that followed (*Rabelais* 61-62).

Bakhtin recounts how Rabelais was even celebrated by his contemporaries during a mock funeral held in Rouen in 1541. During the procession, a banner was carried with the anagram of Rabelais' name. After
the feast, a guest, wearing a monk's habit, read Rabelais' work, the "Chronicle of Gargantua," instead of the Bible (Rabelais 61).

The tradition these contemporaries understood and their appreciation of Rabelais was marked by "exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness" (Rabelais 71). Typical of this during the Middle Ages were the rituals of the "feast of fools," held in the streets and the taverns; the celebrations were a "grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level: gluttony and drunken orgies of the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing" (Rabelais 75).

It was a time and type of culture which allowed and encouraged, through spectacles, feast day celebrations, and carnival pageants, a laughable point of view relative to the world.

The Renaissance conception of laughter can be roughly described as follows: Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint... Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter (Rabelais 66).

The characteristic trait of laughter during these folk events was the affirmation of life; laughter regenerated the world. This regeneration was possible because it was all people, all of humanity that was laughing. No distance or unequal relationships existed among participants in laughter; they were united in their shared commonality of being human beings.

An additional characteristic of laughter during these events was that laughter was positive. Not only were positive connotations given because
the events were life-affirming, but the social activities themselves were viewed as festive and joyous celebrations.

**The mistakes of literary scholars**

Subsequent assessments of Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, would extract the work from its positive, life-affirming folk tradition and read the imagery from official perspectives of the time. For example, according to Bakhtin, Jean De La Bruyère, in *Characters and Mores of this Age*, 1688, judges Rabelais' writings from a literary tradition which emphasized form, simplicity, proportion, and restrained emotion. The unrestrained images of Rabelais, the sexual obscenities, curses and oaths were considered "filth" by La Bruyère even though he admitted that the work itself contained stylistic elements that were "exquisite and excellent" (*Rabelais* 108). According to La Bruyère,

Marot and Rabelais are inexcusable for scattering so much filth in their writings: they both had genius and originality enough to be able to do without it, even for those who seek rather what is comical than what is admirable in the author. Rabelais above all is incomprehensible: his book is a mystery, a mere chimera; it has a lovely woman's face with the feet and tail of a serpent or of some more hideous animal. It is a monstrous jumble of delicate and ingenious morality and of filthy depravation. Where it is bad, it excels by far the worst, and is fit only to delight the rabble; and when it is good, it is exquisite and excellent, and may entertain the most delicate (*Rabelais* 108).

What Bakhtin objects to in the preceding assessment by La Bruyère is that what is negative is the "sexual and scatological obscenity, . . . curses and oaths, double entendres and vulgar quips--in other words, the tradition of folk culture in Rabelais' work, laughter and the lower stratum of the body. The positive aspect is the purely literary, humanist element." What La Bruyère accomplished with his approach is a separation of the "grotesque
tradition peculiar to the marketplace and the academic literary tradition," and in the process, the images of Rabelais "lost their true meaning" (Rabelais 109).

Bakhtin also objects to Victor Hugo's assessment of Rabelais' work. He points out that Hugo failed to understand that the laughter of Rabelais within the folk culture was optimistic.

In his later poetry Hugo's attitude toward Rabelaisian laughter changes. Its universal, all-embracing character now appears to him to be uncanny and out of perspective. Rabelais represents neither the low level nor the summit, he does not allow us to pause, he is ephemeral (fleeting, without a future). Such an interpretation proves a deep lack of understanding of the peculiar optimism expressed in Rabelaisian laughter—a lack that was already manifest in Hugo's earliest writings. From the very beginning laughter in his mind was mostly a negation, a degrading and destroying principle. Though he repeated Nodier's definition of Rabelais as the Homère bouffon, though he used similar definitions: Homère du rire, la moquerie épique, he never fully understood the epic quality of Rabelaisian laughter (Rabelais 128).

When Hugo fails to acknowledge the optimism in Rabelaisian laughter he also denies the regenerating and renewing power of laughter and of the "lower stratum" (Rabelais 126).

Bakhtin partially attributes the negative assessments made of Rabelais' work to the broader cultural perceptions that each critic embraced. La Bruyère, for example, was part of a cultural tradition which adopted a negative view of the nature of man and a skeptical attitude toward laughter and the folk culture. Laughter began to refer to "only... individual and individually typical phenomena of social life" (Rabelais 67). The shift to emphasizing individuals rather than a second nature common to all combined to minimize the importance of laughter. Bakhtin asserts
that an accepted perspective was "That which is important and essential cannot be comical. Neither can history and persons representing it --kings, generals, heroes--be shown in a comic aspect." The role for laughter became narrow and specific (private and social vices); the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter" (Rabelais 67).

Bakhtin attributes Voltaire's criticism of Rabelais to a broader, commonly held perspective as well. Bakhtin claims that Voltaire was guided by an Enlightenment philosophy concerned with rationalism, and that he was committed to an emphasis upon reason as the basis for action and belief; faults and transgressions were due to misguided reasoning. In addition, Voltaire believed that the standards of his time, based as they were on reason, were universally valued and applicable. Consequently, and as the following passage illustrates, Voltaire found Rabelais' work totally unacceptable.

Rabelais in his extravagant and unintelligible book let loose an extreme jollity and an extreme impertinence; he poured out erudition, filth and boredom; you will get a good story two pages long, at the price of two volumes of nonsense. Only a few eccentric persons pride themselves on understanding and esteeming this work as a whole; the rest of the nation laughs at the jokes of Rabelais and holds his book in contempt. He is regarded as chief among buffoons; we are annoyed that a man who had so much wit should have made such wretched use of it; he is a drunked [sic] philosopher who wrote only when he was drunk" (Voltaire cited in Rabelais 116-117).

To Voltaire, the world of Rabelais was extravagant and impossible to understand. Even Rabelais' drunkenness, which Bakhtin sees as an integral part of the festivity of the folk culture of the time, is removed by Voltaire from its folk culture situation and assessed as an unreasonable
condition in a reasonable world.

But it was more than an emphasis upon reason that Bakhtin faulted in Voltaire's assessment of Rabelais. Bakhtin viewed Voltaire as interpreting Rabelais from a "static concept of reality" (Rabelais 124) that allowed Voltaire and other Enlighteners (Bakhtin's terminology) to produce universal value systems. This led to a totally ahistorical assessment of Rabelais. In Bakhtin's words, the Enlighteners were "incapable of understanding and appreciating Rabelais" (Rabelais 116). It was a view of non-historical rationality that led Voltaire and others like him to see Rabelais' work as "superfluous and incomprehensible" (Rabelais 124).

A Bakhtinian picture of the serious and humorous worlds

Bakhtin's assessment of Rabelais' writings and the critiques he makes of literary scholars revolve around a dichotomy: the separation of the official culture from the unofficial, popular culture. As Bakhtin describes the distinctions during the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, "A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval and ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (Rabelais 4).

All these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in all the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials (Rabelais 5).

Bakhtin's emphasis here is on forms of protocol, rituals, and ceremonials, elements similar to those that Mulkay describes as components of the social structures of wedding ceremonies, dinner parties,
etc. But Bakhtin moves to separate the serious from the humorous and, temporarily, and for descriptive purposes only, also situates one culture in opposition to the other in terms of tone.

An intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness is characteristic of official medieval culture. The very contents of medieval ideology -- asceticism, somber providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering, as well as the character of the feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation -- all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness (Rabelais 73).

In contrast, Bakhtin describes the tone of humor and its forms, rituals, and ceremonies in terms of carnival laughter.

The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. . . this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival (Rabelais 11-12).

For initial descriptive purposes here, and in summary, the official world Bakhtin discusses as the serious is the world of ceremonies and rituals associated with ecclesiastical (the Church), feudal and political organizations (the ruling hierarchy) and, as part of this, the social activities which are sanctioned by these groups at a particular time and place. For Bakhtin, the official imposed orderly, and in contrast to the world of humor, sometimes oppressive modes of behavior on the populace.

The unofficial world, the folk culture which seems to operate outside but in conjunction with the official sphere, consists of the social activities, the ceremonies and rituals, which are not specifically sanctioned by official groups. Bakhtin describes these activities and participants as "the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers" (Rabelais 4), and as "carnival pageants, [and] comic shows of the marketplace" (Rabelais 5).
But what distinguishes the two is that within the official, according to Bakhtin, a serious view of the world is generally maintained. The concept of a "serious view of the world" seems an enormous issue to further describe, unless we think of it in terms of our own experiences. Because we live in a world with others and because of our experiences, we routinely know and define a serious world view. When a doctor informs us that the infection we have will get worse without proper medication, we assume for ourselves a serious perspective, and we take the prescribed dosage because we place a particular value on the medication and the doctor's advice.

What's most interesting in discussing a serious view of the world is not defining it scientifically but asking what it is that has already predefined or preguided us in our assessment that something is serious. Upon what basis have we made our determinations and decisions? In the case of a prescription, why do we take it? Perhaps part of the answer is based on our own experiences; we've had similar infections and the drug has worked before. But another part of the answer, and what Bakhtin draws out, is that we live in an organized world in which we give varying degrees of credence, respect, and trust to organizations we may or may not belong to. We believe, at least some of us, generally, that the medical community knows what it's talking about. Of course, what the medical community says is based on its own methods (in our generation, mostly scientifically based and researched methods) and, in the process of taking a doctor's advice we are also accepting what the medical community has preestablished as the right way to fight infections.

We make our assumptions about the serious world built on a whole
host of serious paradigms that we have developed. The government, the organizations we work for, the groups we belong to all, in some measure or another, influence the assessments we make and help us in determining when and how to adopt a serious view of the world. And, of course, we all might do this in different ways. In Bakhtin's assessment of the critics of Rabelais, the critics participated in the serious value judgments of literary circles and of larger cultural values. Voltaire was guided by rationalism and La Bruyère by a focus upon the individual and a diminished view of laughter.

Characteristic of these organizations or groups to which we may or may not belong are forms of hierarchy and control: "... the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions" (Rabelais 9). In Rabelais' world, the kings and church officials, those who partially controlled the economic, political, and religious organizations, made up part of the official culture.

Our acceptance of or reliance upon any of these organizations is an implicit, although perhaps reluctant, acceptance of the hierarchy established within the group. To take a prescribed medication on a doctor's orders is to accept as well the organization that developed and sanctioned the doctor's work. The upshot of this is that the patient, at the bottom of the hierarchy, is also part of it in maintaining the structure through acceptance of the organization via the doctor's advice. To some extent then, the organization and the patient develop a relationship. But in this case, the relationship is unequal in that the organization and its members are
controllers of the directives to the patient.

And within these official cultures and studies, language assumes a tone of seriousness. If the world is serious, if the official culture is serious, then our language corresponds to that in its tone and approach, in the thoughtfulness we seem to display during our conversations, and in the interpretations we make of one another's language. We typically don't write laughable prescriptions or humorous monographs in serious, official worlds. In literary circles, writing humor might even be seen as a risk because the culture and tone of the language from which humor draws is distinct from the typical tone and culture in which literary evaluation takes place.

We might write such documents easily and without fear of criticism, however, in the unofficial world. This unofficial world sees the world through laughter. Again, through our own experiences, we already know and understand this world and we invoke a humorous view in numerous situations. We participate in celebrations, festivities, and conversational exchanges with others with the assumption that what is done and said is taken with a spirit of *jouissance*. What has preguided and positioned us to take a humorous view of the world is not so much related to organizations as to the laughter and pleasure we experience at the time. We might, for example, hold this humorous view of the world watching a classic slap-stick comedy or listening to the banter of a Robin Williams. And one of Bakhtin's primary points is that the humorous view is not tied to formally structured organizations. Instead, the "comic aspect," comprised of laughter and humor, is tied to the idea of "wholeness," a concept Bakhtin uses to emphasize the commonalities that human beings share with one
another and with the world (Rabelais 12). According to Bakhtin, the world and human beings are inter-connected in that people live, die, and are reborn both in the world and through it. If this concept is applied on a physical level, people are dependent upon each other and the world for their daily existence, the air they breathe and the food they eat. At death and through the body's decay, the body again becomes part of the physical world which supplies life for other human beings. The people's laughter and "wholeness" is thus an acknowledgement of the shared interdependence of all of humanity and the world.

If a humorous view is not tied to the formal structures we have in place, and if all human beings are connected to each other and the world in the comic aspect, then we can describe the world of humor differently. Because organizations and groups and all their attendant characteristics are not part of this world, we do not deal with structured and unequal relationships. According to Bakhtin, "We have already said that during carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life" (Rabelais 15). The assumption, particularly if we are describing these two worlds in a contrasting, descriptive way, is that there may be no distance among those who participate in humor in the unofficial; relationships, if they need to be described at all, would be equal.

The language of the unofficial reflects the carefree spirit of informality as well. The tone is optimistic, free of the worry that is part of a serious world perspective.

A new type of communication always creates new forms of speech or a new meaning given to the old forms. For instance, when two
persons establish friendly relations, the form of their verbal intercourse also changes abruptly; they address each other informally, abusive words are used affectionately, and mutual mockery is permitted. ... Verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed and indecent words and expressions may be used (Rabelais 16).

In the unofficial world, financial obligations, greying or thinning hair, or health problems are minimized or set aside completely as legitimate concerns. The organization of the language that accompanies humor in the unofficial world may also be more open than in the official world which expects spell-checked texts, few fragments, consistent punctuation, and appropriate subject matter. Humorous discourse seems at times to thrive on juxtaposition, as in the case of word plays or puns.

In summary, what Bakhtin presents is a descriptive picture of a serious world and a humorous world, each embedded within particular types of social activity and each with its own characteristics and issues of importance. Bakhtin, however, accomplishes more than merely describing the popular folk culture and placing humor and Rabelais' work within the context of folk activity. What Bakhtin develops throughout Rabelais and His World is the idea that the serious and humorous worlds co-exist and overlap. In fact, the co-mingling of these two worlds is a primary assumption behind his critique of scholars such as Hugo and Voltaire.

According to Bakhtin, literary scholars who found Rabelais' images vulgar and obscene did so because they interpreted Rabelais' writings from a serious perspective of the world. These scholars drew upon the paradigms designed to understand the serious activity of their literary work, and, in so doing, drew upon the values connected to those serious worlds. Voltaire wanted a consistently good story rather than a good story every 100 pages
because Voltaire's approach, which valued the dramatic unities of time, place, and theme, was part of the value of a literary work at that historical time from a serious perspective.

Bakhtin notes the merger of humor and its culture with the serious and its culture in more specific ways as well. For example, Bakhtin examines how scholars use the "historic-allegorical" method to decipher Rabelais' writings (Rabelais 112-115). This method essentially consists of "comparing Rabelais' images to the historical events of his time, using various techniques of checking and confrontation" (Rabelais 113). As an illustration, scholars usually consider Gargantua, the giant in Rabelais' work and a character developed within the tradition of popular laughter, to be an impersonation of Francis the First (Rabelais 113), a figure drawn from the serious, official world. And Bakhtin freely acknowledges that Rabelais' novel "doubtless contains many allusions to historical personages and events," (Rabelais 114) a mixing of the serious world of the literary critic with the political world of Francis, and that of the popular, folk culture world typified by images of the giant Gargantuan.

Bakhtin also points to historical moments during which the serious and humorous worlds seemed to merge and become one; no distinction was made between official and folk culture.

In antique culture tragedy did not exclude the laughing aspect of life and coexisted with it. The tragic trilogy was followed by the satiric drama which complemented it on the comic level. Antique tragedy did not fear laughter and parody and even demanded it as a corrective and a complement. Therefore, in the antique world there could be no sharp distinction between official and folk culture, as later appeared in the Middle Ages (Rabelais 121).

Medieval culture differed from the antique world in that it consisted
of an "official serious culture" which existed but was "strictly divided from the marketplace" (Rabelais 96). However, by the end of the Middle Ages, humor and the serious again merged as the "dividing line between humor and great literature" gradually disappeared.

The lower genres begin to penetrate the higher levels of literature. Popular laughter appears in epics, and its intrinsic value is increased in mysteries. Various genres, such as moralities, soties, farces, are developed. Buffoon societies, such as the "Kingdom of Bassoche" and "Carefree Lads" are founded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The culture of laughter begins to break through the narrow walls of festivities and to enter into all spheres of ideological life. Official seriousness and fear could be abandoned even in everyday life" (Rabelais 97).

He further discusses specific works in world literature which he views as examples when "seriousness and laughter . . . reflect each other, and are indeed whole aspects, not separate serious and comic images as in the usual modern drama" (Rabelais 122). To illustrate his point he mentions Euripides' Alcestis and Shakespeare's tragedies (Rabelais 122).

The significance of Bakhtin's acceptance of co-existing serious and humor worlds, and their mergers at different historical moments extends, however, beyond such a simple acknowledgement. Bakhtin makes clear with his scattered comments that the interweaving of the cultures operates differently at different historical times. While ancient culture may have successfully merged the two cultures so that one reflected the other, the serious cultures in which Voltaire and Hugo operated were less accommodating to the humor in Rabelais' writings. The co-existence of the serious and humor worlds was more characterized by a dominance of the serious stance and a subjugation and sometimes ridicule of what came from the world of humor.
The significant question now is how can Bakhtin's approach of two cultures, their separate descriptions as well as their overlap or juncture be applicable to technical communication?

An adaptation to rhetoric/technical communication

Rabelais' folk humor world is culture- and time-bound in the sense that the social activities which were part of humor during the Middle Ages are not mirror images of the folk humor world of today. But, if we can accept Bakhtin's theoretical premise that humor is most at home and can be described most completely within its own social milieu, then an acknowledgement that we do participate in humor tacitly admits to some type of humorous social give-and-take which bears resemblance to Rabelais' world of giants and irreverence.

Contemporary rhetoric/technical communication and humor study, focused as it is upon different social levels and influences, can help us identify more precisely what that humorous social activity might be and allow us an opportunity to characterize a similar folk culture within which humor works most freely. The past research in these fields can thus define a contemporary corollary to Rabelaisian humor, folk culture, and social activity.

For example, drawing upon rhetoric/technical communication and humor research directed to large cultural issues, we might look to those social activities which are festive, familiar, understandable and open to all those within the culture and to those activities which are closely linked to laughter and pleasure. On this macro level, the current celebration of St.
Patrick's Day encompasses a history and characteristics similar to the earlier rituals connected to the feast of fools that Bakhtin discusses.

According to Bakhtin, the feast of fools was originally celebrated by schoolmen and clerics on special church days such as St. Stephen, New Year's Day, feast of the Holy Innocents, Epiphany, and celebrations of St. John. The festivals were eventually banned from churches but became absorbed into street carnivals and events outside the church (Rabelais 74).

Currently, celebrations of St. Patrick's Day are still held as solemn church events in some congregations, but the festivities have also moved outside the realm of an official Church tribute to a saint to city parades and pubs where the Irish nationality becomes as celebrated as the Saint. It is a special event during which everyone is encouraged to become Irish and participate in the unfettered spirit of song, drink, and celebration. The festivities vary considerably, from New York City's large St. Patrick's Day parade to the small-town bar owner offering two-for-one drinks to anyone who wears green to green beer. But the spirit of the day remains fairly consistent in diverse places; a boisterous celebration punctuated with laughter and a good deal of blarney. Only in celebration would typically three-piece-suited business people don green wigs, paint shamrocks on their cheeks, and sing soulful, off-key renditions of When Irish Eyes Are Smiling. Only within a humorous and laughable view of the world would celebrants acknowledge to each other and themselves their moral or ethical deficiencies with a glass-clinking toast of "May you be in heaven half-an-hour before the devil knows you're dead."

Another celebration marked by humor and which seems pervasive in
some cultural groups would be New Year's Eve festivities with often staid, conservative-by-day individuals blowing whistles, wearing pointed, multi-colored paper hats, and counting in unison backwards from 60 at the stroke of midnight. And when the clock strikes, strangers embrace each other with New Year greetings and loud, celebratory yells.

Similar, smaller festivals unique to a particular society or ethnic group might also be identified. Some groups center a celebration of their heritage around ethnic foods which are reserved for such occasions. Norwegians in Minnesota celebrate their heritage by soaking lutefisk (white fish soaked in lye) and lefse and serving it during celebratory meals to others who share in their traditions. Many Americans celebrate the Fourth of July by dressing in red, white, and blue star-and-stripe outfits for parades. Some participants eat hot dogs sold by public street vendors, and then gather together with others to watch exploding fireworks in the night sky. State fairs, Mardi Gras, county fairs, and local celebrations complete with parades and carnivals might become loci of future research investigation because, like the St. Patrick's Day celebrations and Rabelais' celebrations, these activities are closely tied to laughter and the spirit of humor.

These activities are not typically part of the serious and officially sanctioned view of the world. During these types of celebrations, participants, at least momentarily, seem to set aside the value systems which govern their day-to-day activities. Individuals who usually make grocery purchases based on cholesterol or fat content allow themselves to participate in a world unconcerned with such issues. Fair-goers eat hot
dogs, fried cheese curls, deep-fat fried onion rings, and pork rinds.

Laughter becomes inter-twined with and sometimes indistinguishable from screams of fear as roller-coaster riders hit the peak of an incline and plummet down a steep hill. Only in the activity of a carnival world and in humor would riders allow themselves to be kept safe by skinny wheels on narrower tracks, and only within this environment is such activity understandable and acceptable. Screams inter-mixed with laughter are not part of typically serious activities, and consuming large quantities of fat and cholesterol are outside the mainstream of acceptable serious activity.

Future research which would examine humor within activity typically marked by laughter is markedly different than what is now occurring; current sites of study and areas of importance are part of the serious world and its activity. This new direction in humor research will be important to researchers interested in humor within large cultural social activities, and for technical communicators, an equally fruitful area of study is the humorous social activity in which they are typically embedded as they carry out their official tasks in the serious world of work. My purpose in the following chapter will be to describe, through an examination of the artifacts which move through offices and organizations, a limited picture of the humor culture of technical communicators.

But in addition, because the humor and the serious always overlap, it is necessary to explore what can potentially occur when humor (drawn from a culture of laughter) is incorporated into the world of the serious, that of the technical world and its texts. Therefore, in the final sections of Chapter Four, I will examine the interruption that occurs when humor is
incorporated into the serious world of technical texts. The interruption will be viewed from two perspectives: a textual interruption and an interpretive interruption.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

Technical communicators participate, as do other professionals, in activities suited to the world of humor, such as St. Patrick's Day. But, in addition, those who work in the field of professional writing also have an opportunity to participate in an active humor culture within office and academic environments.

This office-humor culture has not yet been acknowledged in humor scholarship or rhetoric/technical communication study, and, consequently, the first purpose of this chapter is to substantiate the presence of such a culture and to take initial steps to describe some of its traits. To begin this process, I examine some artifacts of the culture, humorous documents which professionals pass among each other in offices and institutions. These documents provide textual evidence to support the existence of a contemporary humor culture; in addition, these artifacts can illustrate some prominent themes and issues with which technical communicators and their readers are already familiar and in which they already engage in laughter.

Following this limited description, I illustrate what potentially occurs when humor is written into technical texts. As Bakhtin notes, the serious and the humorous always potentially intersect. But because the serious is the dominant, assumed perspective, humor becomes an interruption when it momentarily breaks the pervasive uniformity of seriousness. I explore the humor interruption in two ways: as a textual interruption and as an interpretive interruption.
On a textual level, the intersection of the serious and the humorous can be seen in the similarities between the office-humor culture texts and technical documents which incorporate humor. An examination of what occurs at this level not only demonstrates the application of a primary component of Bakhtin's position, but also allows for a more detailed examination of some of the specific changes and overlaps of subject matter and format which have developed in the humor which has been incorporated into technical texts.

The second interruption I explore relates to interpretation. I present an example of humor's use and the multiple interpretations which resulted as participants adapted both a humorous and serious interpretive stance during the kairotic moment of humor. In the situation I examine, a complex mixture of experiences, values, and group affiliations contributed to a variety of interpretations.

The research in this chapter is not designed to be exhaustive. For example, I present a synthesis of the vast array of subject matter which appears in office humor. I base the summary information I present upon 475 examples of office humor texts which are or have been in recent circulation (See pages 90-92 for a discussion of these examples). I also show the visual inter-relationships between cartoons which are part of the office-humor culture and cartoons which appear in technical texts. I present these samples to show some interesting connections and not as representative of what is occurring in the technical communication field in a general sense. In addition, I discuss a single interpretive moment during which a humorous text was interpreted from both a serious and a
humorous stance. This single example neither represents what would occur with the same text in a different situation nor is it an all-encompassing model for technical communication and humor research.

Instead, I offer the following: 1) office-humor texts, 2) a synthesis of subject matter I found in those texts, 3) comparisons of office humor and humor in technical documents, and 4) a single example which produced differing interpretations. All of these sources and interpretations operate as initial steps toward understanding the possible utility of the rhetoric of humor I developed in Chapters Two and Three. At this point, the goal of my research is to suggest the potential uses to which the preceding theoretical data can be put. The ensuing examination, however tentative, is in my estimation the appropriate culmination to this dissertation. My aim throughout the preceding chapters has been to articulate an approach to humor which is relevant for the field of technical communication. In this endeavor, I have worked to develop a suggestive theoretical stance that will serve as an analytical framework for inquiry into the nature and function of office humor by professional communication scholars. This concluding chapter is the reasonable first step in the application of that theoretical framework, and while, at present, the discussion I conduct in this chapter can only be seen as relevant to the kairotic moments that condition the examples themselves, it is my hope that they will also point in the direction(s) from which we might expect further illumination in the future.
A shared office-humor culture

The notion of a culture suggests that participants share common values or beliefs and that they actively participate in structuring and restructuring the culture. I make no claim that all participants share in a humor culture in the same manner, no more than all members of an organizations accept all the corporate goals or values of the organizations for which they work. But just as researchers of serious corporate cultures make inferences about a corporate culture from the patterns of writing in a business environment (i.e., the use of passive voice has been valued in scientific texts), it is possible to make limited explanations about a humor culture as well.

What I present here is unlike current research of serious corporate cultures, particularly case study research, in that the samples are not those which flowed through one particular office. Such research will obviously be needed in the future, but my purpose here is not to offer this kind of restricted, if intensive sampling. I might have done so if the theoretical concept of an office-humor culture had already been established and accepted. But such is not the case at present. As the studies in Chapter Two demonstrate, explorations of humor are typically attached to a “serious” culture, and because I am advancing the position that an office-humor culture may exist simultaneously with a “serious” one, the primary purpose of offering the following examples is to examine the texts as indicators of the very existence of a humor culture in workplace environments. My own stasis question at present, then, is “does it exist?”, not “what is it like?”
In placing these texts forward as textual evidence of an office-humor culture, I employ the research approach of anthropologists such as Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi who collected jokes, stories, folk-tales, comedies, and other humorous works of literature by dozens of different authors in order to build a picture of the Tamil culture and about Tamil humor in particular. Obviously, Ferro-Luzzi’s collection is much more extensive than what I provide in the next section, but Ferro-Luzzi’s approach to exploring a particular culture provides a precedent for the approach I take; that is, like Ferro-Luzzi, I believe that a collection of humorous texts, in the form of documents people have interpreted as humorous, can be a useful starting point for understanding a culture which has not yet been acknowledged as existent much less explored and mapped.

Collection of office-humor culture documents

I began collecting bulletin-board pin-up humor in the late 1980s. Colleagues who knew of my interest in humor would send me their latest “finds,” their favorite one-liners, or the “popular” cartoon of the moment in their offices. The documents I received came from academic halls, business office cubicles, and the walls of the body shop where the tires of my 1987 Nissan were rotated. In addition, I corresponded with Kevin Grace, Assistant Head of the Archives and Rare Books Department at the University of Cincinnati Library. Grace, an archivist and anthropologist with an interest in folklore, has been collecting Xerox humor since 1979, at first, more “by happenstance than by intent” (Grace). Eventually, Grace began a systematic collection, and he sent me 30 texts which were transmitted anonymously among office personnel and which show
variations over time. (Some of the samples were duplicates of those I had already collected; others were not.)

While this personal collection might have been a sufficient base from which to make observations, I added to the collection 104 sample texts from the collections of Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter, collectors of folklore humor from offices, or what they refer to as humor from the paperwork empire. I incorporated these specific documents from Dundes and Pagter’s collection for two reasons. First, some of the samples were unique variations of texts I had already been given; thus their texts provided evidence that these artifacts of office-humor culture which I was using to make observations had a circulation of more than one office or academic institution. Secondly, I observed that Dundes and Pagter had collected a substantial number of texts which, as they admitted, would be considered blatantly racist or sexist. My personal collection had only six such samples, and, in the interest of offering an open and balanced descriptive picture of the artifacts of office humor, it seemed important to include at least a few more samples of this type of text. From their collection I selected only those “potentially offensive” documents (14 in all) which I believed I had seen before but of which I did not have copies in my own collection, and from this eclectic collection of documents, I eliminated documents which I had earlier filed but for which I had no written record of the provider of the text or the place the text had been located.

Further, because I intended to use the examples as office-humor artifacts (i.e. as samplings of an office-humor culture) I determined that I would use only those documents which could reasonably be viewed as part
of a culture. Because I use texts, the texts themselves had to provide some indication that they existed and functioned within and through a community of participants. In other words, the texts themselves had to bear traces of participant use.

This textual evidence is apparent in two ways in the texts I finally selected for my observations. First, the texts (bulletin board cartoons, humorous business cards, etc.) are documented as having existed in more than one organization or office. Sometimes this documentation is so specific that the particular business and the date the text was collected are identified. In other cases, the documentation is less specific in that the provider of the text is named only as, for example, "a computer techie" from "an unnamed international corporation" who gave the text to a friend who passed it on to someone else who eventually handed it to me. Second, the texts I use show signs of having been manipulated sometime between exchanges, additional textual evidence that participants read and used the office humor. In other words, each text in the collection used for my observations has at least one counterpart text which is remarkably similar but which was collected at a different site and time.

After selecting the relevant documents for my observations, I identified the general subject matter and theme of each humorous text, using the texts themselves to generate the subject matter categories. This approach of using the texts to generate subject matter categories is in keeping with the approach of other humor research. Ferro-Luzzi's first step in examining the Tamil culture was to explore the subject matter of recorded Tamil jokes. Other researchers, particularly sociologists and
folklorists, have also been concerned with developing subject matter/theme
typologies from collected jokes. (See Dundes A Study, and Kravitz, for
typologies developed from collections and which are, in their cases, related
to ethnic humor.) In my observations of office-humor texts, whenever a
number of subject matters seemed to be the point of the humor in a single
document I placed the text in multiple categories.

The final documents I use to make my observations have thus
undergone scrutiny and evaluation. Nonetheless, these texts should be
viewed only as interesting artifacts which have been found in offices and
institutions. They are samples only, rather than paradigmatic examples.
What the texts and my descriptions of them do offer is an initial step in
bringing to the forefront the issues and themes which are germane to the
existence of a humor culture. In sum, my exploration offers a limited
description of what some professionals are already finding laughable and
how this laughter operates to figure forth the presence of a latent but
nonetheless significant culture and rhetoric of humor.  

The first step toward understanding the potential use of the rhetoric
of humor I developed in the preceding chapters is to provide a description of
the texts I use which are indicators that a shared office-humor culture
exists. The next sections, Rabelaisian images and Tempered Rabelaisian
images provide this description.

Rabelaisian images

The texts I collected sometimes appear Rabelaisian in their emphasis
upon unrestrained emotion, obscenities, and curses. Some of the current
texts would probably elicit from contemporary readers a wrath similar to
that expressed by Voltaire or La Bruyère because the texts pour forth, as Voltaire would exclaim of Rabelais' work, "erudition, filth and boredom" (Rabelais 116-117). The texts would appear less sexist, racist, or culturally offensive in a Rabelaisian-type folk culture environment and activity. However, within the office environment, they are already part of the serious world, and this kind of document probably appears less frequently than less scatological themes.

The office-humor culture which is publicly displayed typically consists of more socially-acceptable references and themes. And because technical texts are often circulated in public arenas, the more conservative humorous texts seem more likely to interweave easily within the serious world and to have more direct connections with what professional writers incorporate into their writing. Therefore, I concentrate upon the conservative examples in my limited description of the humor culture within offices and institutions. The following synthesis is not meant to explain any particular text but only to build the argument that those who work in offices and institutions may actively participate in humor, and to describe an array of subject matter from which technical writers might draw in incorporating the humor around them into technical documents.

Tempered Rabelaisian images

Bakhtin's general premise is that people affirm their shared lives as human beings through humor and the activity of which it is part. In the Middle Ages, humor and its activity was carnivalesque, "the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (Rabelais 8). In this second life, people "entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and
People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations" (Rabelais 9-10).

One way of understanding the elements people share with one another is to focus upon the physical commonalities people share because they are human beings. At a physical level, those human characteristics comprise the elements which are essential to sustaining or maintaining life; in order to exist, human beings need to eat or take in nourishment, digest what is needed, eliminate what is not needed, breathe, and reproduce. If the body is deprived of only one of these physical functions, life eventually ceases, either for a single individual or for humanity as a whole.

Humor, both in Rabelais' marketplace and in present office-humor culture, advances these life-affirming themes. In contemporary culture, human reproduction is a fairly typically subject of the office humor documents I examined. As the example in Figure 3 illustrates, the subject

![Reproduction Is Fun](image)

Figure 3: "Reproduction is fun" office humor text
of reproduction is sometimes presented as simply celebratory. Other
documents in the office-humor culture, however, reflect a good-natured
frustration with reproduction. For example, one particular cartoon depicts
an elderly couple in bed. The old woman, obviously pregnant, is slowly
dragging herself out of bed and loudly complaining to her bed partner: "You
and your 'Just one more time for old time's sake!""

An additional subject which is prominent in the office-humor culture
texts I explored relates to elimination/defecation, another physical function
human beings share. The text in Figure 4 is typical of this type of
document from the collection I use for my observations.

**TYPES OF MEN ONE MEETS IN A WASHROOM**

5. **Timid**: Cannot urinate if someone is watching, flushes urinal as if he
   has already used it, sneaks back later.

13. **Childish**: Looks directly into bottom of urinal, likes to see it bubble.

14. **Patient**: Stands very close for a long time waiting, reads newspaper
   with free hand.

**TYPES OF GIRLS IN THE POWDER ROOM**

- **Cautious Girl**: Has heard of some girls contracting V.D. from toilet seats,
  she straddles bowl, leans over to flush toilet and pees on new nylons.

- **Literary Girl**: Always takes "Book of the Month" to powder room; sits in
  can and reads; blames the book *Forever Amber* for her piles.

**Figure 4**: Elimination and male/female typology

The partial sample in Figure 4 represents the more conservative
descriptions of men and "girls" in washroom scenarios. Some of the other
definitions not included from the sample are more Rabelaisian in that they offer images "in an extremely exaggerated form" (Rabelais 18) and would probably be deemed obscene in traditional scholarly works.

The significance of these two themes, reproduction and elimination/defecation, is that in the samples I examine, these themes also combine with subject matter drawn from the serious world. For example, documents such as Figure 5 connect reproduction with productivity, a typical concern of many business people.

The connection in this case seems to favor the business perspective because the humor is directed at workers who take too long to accomplish tasks and get results. The example in Figure 6, which connects elimination and defecation to employer-employee relationships, seems to have a slightly

![Image of elephants mating]

**GETTING THINGS DONE AROUND HERE IS LIKE MATING ELEPHANTS:**

1. It's done at a high level.
2. It's accompanied with a lot of moaning and screaming.
3. And it takes two years to see any results!

Figure 5: Reproduction and productivity connection in the humor
different potential. In the case of the double-tiered outhouse in the figure, the employees may be taking the upper hand because, in the humor, they are able to acknowledge that they are the potential recipients of the excrement which management drops upon them. In effect, it is management which can and often does make employee lives unpleasant.

In addition, in the samples I examine an abundant number of documents do not contain direct reference to bodily functions. Instead, the subject matter is derived from a variety of issues drawn from the activity and work of the serious world. Because, as Bakhtin contends, the world of humor is characterized by the commonalities people share as human beings,
an examination of some of the dominating themes and subjects in these samples, including those without reference to bodily functions, should help reveal some potential commonalities workers may share.

A broad sampling of the issues which are routinely spoofed in the office humor texts I examine is included in the chart in Table 1. As even this limited list indicates, technical communicators may find an abundant number of issues from the serious world laughable, both those related to broad social issues and those which are more reflective of a work environment.

Table 1: Issues spoofed in humor culture texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad social issues</th>
<th>Office-related issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>politics</td>
<td>fitness reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religion</td>
<td>diplomacy in the office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race relations</td>
<td>teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recycling</td>
<td>competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taxation</td>
<td>deadlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>betting</td>
<td>time-off from work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alcoholism</td>
<td>errors made by employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old age</td>
<td>hourly labor rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sports</td>
<td>frustrations with computers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medical practices</td>
<td>customer complaints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government regulations</td>
<td>job stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>birth control</td>
<td>retirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>sick-leave policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>welfare payments</td>
<td>expense accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Mafia</td>
<td>boss-secretary relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bakhtin makes a similar observation concerning the comic literature which developed prior to the Renaissance. "The scope of this [the comic] literature is almost limitless" (Rabelais 14). The diversity of the subject matter in the office-humor texts ranges from spoofs on the medical
profession to handling expense accounts in an office environment. In addition, some issues such as job stress and politics seem relevant and applicable to a large number of readers while narrower issues, such as hourly labor rates or betting, would be the concerns of a more limited number of people.

Textual, observable interruptions

Technical communicators potentially participate in the sharing of texts which incorporate this diverse subject matter. However, a number of office humor texts I examine relate to computer technology, and this area seems particularly fruitful for examination of what occurs on a textual level when humor interrupts the serious world because computers and technology are an integral part of the work of many technical communicators and their readers.\(^{25}\) In effect, my assumption is that professional writers may draw upon subject matter for humor with which they and their readers are familiar. My position here is not that office humor is dominated by computer technology or that professional communicators will only incorporate humor with a "technological" theme. Instead, I present the following comparisons to demonstrate and further explicate the theoretical approach I develop in Chapters Two and Three which promotes the premise that, in a serious world environment, humor acts as a force of interruption. The selections I use relating to computers and technology in the next section thus provide an example of how that interruption might be observable at a textual level.

While computers usually expedite tasks for their users and are a
highly valued technological apparatus in the workplace generally, office humor about computers points out the problems and inefficiencies that are also part of working with these machines. For example, variations of the following text have been in existence since the late 1980s.

*To err is human. To really foul things up requires a computer.*

At its best, the computer offers its users efficiency and speed; at its worst, the use of a computer can result in inadvertently deleted data and time-consuming troubleshooting for the user. Computer frustration is not simply machinery-related however, since in practice the computer operator's lack of skill is often the reason for data deletion or for the need for troubleshooting procedures; human error can simply be magnified when the computer is involved.

Sometimes office humor tends to place the blame on the computer rather than the operator. In Figure 7, the computer is portrayed as the

![Figure 7: Computer as the thief](image)
thief, the instrument which has stolen the data and which refuses to return it to its rightful owner. The owner has reached a desperate point; she wants the data returned NOW, and she resorts to both name-calling (dirt bag) and a pistol. The suggestion is that she is willing to shoot and kill the machine for its crime of theft.

A similar example is the following item shown in Figure 8, except that in this case the computer's crime is not discernible; any misdemeanor or felony could be supplied by the reader. Perhaps it was the preceding online documentation or the help screens or perhaps the general complexity of the software program. But whatever the reason, the frustration of the character is clearly evident in the duck's tears, the tip-toed stance, and the ready-to-

"HIT ANY KEY TO CONTINUE"

Figure 8: A duck's frustration
strike position with which the mallet is held. The computer-generated
directions "Hit any key to continue" seem to be the final straw for the duck
who is poised to follow the directions and eliminate the possibility that the
computer can offer further assistance or direction."

The connection between the preceding documents and technical
communication is that when technical communicators incorporate humor
into their texts, they may potentially develop images and forms which are
similar to those which exist in the office-humor culture but which also may
be variants." As Bakhtin notes, "a new type of communication always
creates new forms of speech or a new meaning given to the old forms"
(Rabelais 16).

Thematically, the frustration associated with using a computer can be
seen in both the humor culture artifact on the left and in the image taken
from a technical text on the right (see Figure 9).

The "duck" document, part of office-humor culture, was reported in
existence at a trucking company in Eureka, California (Dundes and Pagter
167) and eventually found its way to a bulletin board at Mankato State
University. The "password" cartoon is the opening graphic of Chapter One
in Macs for Dummies, one text in a series of Dummies books which purports
to lead the inexperienced computer user through the complexities of
computers and also claims to be a reference book for more experienced
computer users.

The interplay of the "duck" document and the "password" cartoon is
most obvious in the mallet image in both documents. Interestingly, though,
while both documents contain a computer user and the mallet, the
Figure 9: A duck’s frustration and a computer user’s password.

The relationship between the mallet and the users differs substantially. In the “duck” document, the user takes control of a frustrating situation by poising to strike the computer. In the “password” cartoon, it is the nervous user who is the likely victim, not only of the mallet but of the computer to which the mallet is attached.
A Bakhtinian irony seems to play itself out in these images in that in office-humor culture the “duck” is allowed to take control much like Rabelais’ contemporaries who operated in a folk humor culture to remove themselves from the “official” and “serious” worlds in which they lived. When the mallet/user image appears in a technical text which circulates in the contemporary “serious” world of computer instructions, the user is positioned to be controlled by the technology.

One possible explanation for the juxtapositioning of the users in these two documents is, of course, the contexts in which each document circulates. The office-humor culture may consist of texts such as the duck ready to smash the computer because the humor is not directly connected to specific organizations which operate in the serious world. On the other hand, a cartoon which is part of a manual connected to a specific computer company and to the “serious” world of work, may, as in this example, preserve the “serious” element and allow the computer to maintain superiority over the user.

But, for the purposes of this comparison, the important element is that these two texts, one from office-humor culture and the other from a technical text, have striking similarities. In addition to the mallet/user images, each uses cartoon characters, a form which is dominant in the office-humor culture and almost unheard of as a form of “serious” technical writing.

Similar elements can be detected in the examples in Figure 10. On the left is a document which, with variations, has been circulating among office personnel for a number of years. I was first given a copy in
Figure 10: Skeletal remains office humor and a user's slow response time

1991, and a similar version was given to me in 1995 by a colleague who got it from an unnamed "computer fanatic." On the right is a cartoon which appeared in the MACS for Dummies computer manual.

At issue in the humor is response time. In the office-humor text, the computer's response time has obviously resulted in too long a wait for the user, who now rests and waits only in skeletal form. In the technical text example, "response time" seems more clearly connected to the user who apparently has not even responded to the point of taking the monitor out of its box. And like the preceding "duck" and "password" examples, the
computer is seemingly at fault in the office-humor version while the user takes the blame in the document which is in the technical instruction manual.

The significance of the preceding examples is primarily the interconnections that can be textually noted between texts in the office-humor culture and the humor in technical texts. In these specific examples, the cartoons that were incorporated into the technical text are interesting variations of texts which have also moved through offices and institutions. However, while the form of the cartoon and the single line of text remains similar, important distinctions are also apparent in who or what is being spoofed in the cartoons.

These differences are important because they raise several questions which will undoubtedly need additional research. For example, can manual writers ever directly incorporate office humor wholesale into technical texts? In the previously examined case, such a move might seem unlikely because of objections the developers of Macintosh equipment might have to allowing their product to become a target of humor. And yet, if professional communicators and computer manufacturers recognize the fact that readers and writers routinely spoof computer technology in the office-humor culture, the incorporation of the “duck” document might be just as acceptable as the “password” cartoon.

In fact, the “duck” image has already made an appearance in the technical world of professional communicators. Speakers at a presentation on developing resumes on the World Wide Web incorporated the “duck” on one of their multi-media slides which listed some basic features of HTML,
the markup language used for developing web sites. The “duck” was used to emphasize a speaker’s point that even the most skilled user of HTML will run into difficulties when working on the Web; according to the speaker, the duck image is now part of a Macintosh clip-art collection (Adams). The image is also being used as a logo for laboratory assistants in Mankato State University’s Academic Computer Center. The supervisor of the center wears a button with the duck image, and he is promoting the button’s use for his assistants because he believes the image will help make computer users of the lab more comfortable asking the lab assistants for help.

Textual, “in the spirit of humor” interruptions

I selected the preceding examples to illustrate what I believe is an observable, textual intersection of the office-humor culture and the humor which is now being incorporated into technical texts. Such a close connection cannot always be made, however, between what occurs in office humor and what is incorporated in technical texts.

Sometimes, the humor that is incorporated into technical documents seems more reflective of a jouissance, a spirit of humor, than of existing cultural artifacts. And while it is beyond the scope of this research to explicate this humor in detail, I intend to recognize its presence in technical texts by presenting two subtle passages written by professional communicators regarding computers and technology.

The first example was reported by a participant on the tech writing listserv who found the text extremely amusing. According to the listserv message, the writers of a computer systems manual coded a system error
code so that if and when the system crashed, the error code XXXXXX would read as the following:

A system error has just occurred which was previously thought to be impossible (Gray).

The spirit of humor in which the writers seem engaged allowed them to spoof their own technical expertise in creating a flawless program. And the technical communicator who wrote the following in a manual seems engaged in the same type of laughable spirit.

It is very important that you shutdown the system "cleanly" using the shutdown or halt commands. On some systems, pressing [ctrl-alt-del] will be trapped and cause a shutdown; on other systems, however, using the "Vulcan nerve pinch" will reboot the system immediately and may cause disaster (Linux 116).

The ability to laugh at the technology and our own expertise is part of what Bakhtin describes as "a sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities." It is a "world inside out," which can never be "pure negation" but which "revives and renews at the same time" (Rabelais 11).

**Interpretive Interruptions**

It is this gay, carnival spirit of humor which is also linked to the second type of interruption that will be investigated in this study; the interruption which develops in terms of the interpretations that are made of a text.

In the preceding sections, office humor was explored on a textual level. Professional communicators may potentially participate in an office-humor environment, and, in their active participation of laughing, communicators are in the process of continually constructing the office-
humor culture. An important aspect of this humor culture building activity is that as participants laugh at texts they also share their humorous experiences and interpretations with others by passing along the documents for others to enjoy. The situation is akin to hearing a funny joke in the office and sharing it at home or in another situation. What gets shared is not only the particular text but, potentially, the humorous interpretation of the joke as well. The continually sharing and passing on of a humorous text or joke creates for the participants shared experiences in reading and interpreting texts as laughable.

Of course, technical writers and readers are also experienced in interpreting texts from the stance of the serious world. They can bring to any reading the issues and concerns they associate with the world of work and not with the work of humor. Potentially, then, the interpretations that can be made of a text may draw heavily upon the serious world perspective, or the humorous, or be a combination of both.

Situations and the interpretations that are made will differ, but specific examples can illustrate issues which technical communicators may need to consider as they make decisions about incorporating humor into technical texts. For this reason, I examine one instance and describe the interpretations made of the humorous text to identify some of the issues. The example is situated in the serious world because this is the site in which most technical documents are written and read. I focus upon the humor as an interruption in this case because the humor has invaded the world of work, the serious site of reading and writing and accomplishing specific tasks in the world. In addition, by emphasizing the interruptive
element in each case, the potential exists to discuss both the serious and
the humorous interpretations that operate during the interruption.

The following, more extended example is presented for purposes of
illustration to further explain the use of the theoretical approach I develop
in Chapters Two and Three. It is not a case study in the research sense that
may be familiar to technical communicators, although such research will
certainly be needed in the future. Instead, the following example serves a
purpose similar to the examples offered by humor researchers Alleen Nilsen
and Don Nilsen, influential American humor scholars who draw upon
diverse samples to advance their thesis that language usage and humor
reflect differing American perceptions of male and female roles. My purpose
in offering the following example is similar in that my intent is to explore
on an expanded scale the interpretive potential of my own analytical
framework.

The following example, therefore, should not be viewed as an
empirical test case. Instead, the example serves a role similar to the
example text used by Michael Mendelson to explicate a dialogical model he
builds for business communication. As Mendelson argues,

\[ \ldots \text{there is an inherent problem with the concept of the "example."} \]
\[ \text{Any example I could offer will invariably be seen as a paradigm that} \]
\[ \text{gives form to all my generalizations and so sets a suggested pattern} \]
\[ \text{for emulation. My example can not be simply an instance; it must,} \]
\[ \text{of necessity, be "exemplary." I would like, however, to indicate that} \]
\[ \text{what follows is better seen as a kind of parallel to other} \]
\[ \text{correspondence situations, but a parallel that does not stand as a} \]
\[ \text{privileged precedent (303).} \]

The example I present in the next section should thus be considered
in the spirit in which it is offered, as an illustration of the potential use of
the theory that is being advanced.

**Technical writing class example -- interpretations from a "serious" perspective**

The interruption of humor into the serious world may produce a blend of interpretations, some of which draw upon the world of humor and some of which draw upon the serious. Just as diverse interpretations were made of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (discussed in Chapter Two) the following example illustrates the inter-mixing of the two cultures and shows the issues which became prominent in the interpretations of a kairotic moment: group affiliations and values. In this particular instance, the interruption of humor into the serious world became a complex blend of critique and affirmation.

The situation was a technical writing classroom in which the following document was introduced by the instructor into a graduate-level technical writing class.28

The Lord's Prayer has 56 words; at Gettysburg, Lincoln spoke only 268 long-remembered words; and we got a whole country goin' on the 1,322 words in the Declaration of Independence. So how come it took the federal government 26, 911 words to issue a regulation on the sale of cabbages?

The classroom situation in which this text was interpreted by students and the instructor was part of the serious world and its activity. Just prior to showing students the document, the instructor was reviewing the characteristics of technical writing, traits such as precision, clarity, the use of technical acronyms, etc. The overall tone of the classroom was serious and studious; the instructor was listing the characteristics on the board and the students were dutifully listening, discussing, and, at times, taking notes.
Then the mood changed. Students read the document on the overhead projector screen and responded with enthusiastic laughter. Part of their laughter then became intermixed with semi-private and seemingly humorous asides to students seated close to them. In the midst of the laughter and informal conversations were sprinkled comments from some students that they had seen this text before and found it funny the first time they encountered it as well.

Because this particular incident occurred within a site and activity which would be characteristic of the serious world (the academic classroom and learning the characteristics of technical writing) one interpretive direction that the instructor and some of the students took was to associate the meaning of the text with their prior experiences, values, expectations, and group affiliations formed in and through the serious world. In other words, the kairotic moment and the interpretations given to the humor were interconnected with the contextual elements of that serious world.

For example, the text itself offers evidence that the interpretations made could be logically connected to the serious world. The documents in the text, the Lord's Prayer, the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address and the regulations on the sale of cabbages are texts which offer guidance or regulation for the manner in which people conduct their lives in the serious world. The Lord's Prayer reflects a whole range of religious ideas that bind faiths and congregations together. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address became the pivotal point of a Civil War that divided a country. The Declaration of Independence described a form of government that has become the operating principle of countless laws and ways of organizing
behavior in the serious world. In this particular case, the documents are part of the same organizations, the ecclesiastical and the political, which Bakhtin references in his discussion of Rabelais' writings.

The instructor placed this text and his interpretation of it within the paradigm of the technical communication field and the values of the members of the field. The instructor viewed the document as an illustration of the damaging results which occur when technical communicators don't abide by the technical writing paradigm which associates "good" technical writing with conciseness.29 According to the reasoning of the instructor, documents which have impact, the Lord's Prayer, the Gettysburg Address, and the Declaration of Independence, are written with relatively few words because the writers have been precise. The Lord's Prayer has only 56 words, the Gettysburg Address 268, and the Declaration of Independence only 1,322. The regulations on the sale of cabbages, a seemingly minor issue in comparison to the religious and political ramifications of the other texts, consisted of almost 27,000 words. The result, for the instructor, was that the writers of the cabbage regulations were ineffective and imprecise in their writing because it should have taken fewer words of explanation on cabbages than it did for the Declaration of Independence which "got a whole country goin'."

In making this type of connection, the instructor was also drawing upon a host of other serious world connections in his interpretation of the text. Part of the instructor's association of the text under investigation with the serious world was also a common teacher/student anticipation that what occurs in a classroom is linked to learning. In this case,
students were expected to learn that conciseness and clarity count. Another more subtle aspect of learning suggested by the instructor's preceding interpretation is that a correlation exists between the worth of a subject and the number of words devoted to it. What is minimally important should receive minimal verbal attention.

This attitude that a correlation exists between the worth of a subject and the attention given to it typifies one type of argument which gets made in the serious world. For example, the opening chapter of this dissertation argues the need for more research into humor because it is making a significant appearance in technical texts, and because professional communicators are actively discussing the subject in their electronic conversations. As an additional example, academic conference planners, who operate in the serious world, typically outline areas of prominent discussion in a field and focus proposal calls around those issues. Some conference planners even predetermine the number of accepted sessions based upon the number of proposals submitted in that particular area. The higher the number of proposals (or verbiage) in an area such as visual communication, the more accepted sessions in that area. The instructor potentially drew upon a similar assumption, one prevalent in the serious world, in making the argument that cabbage regulations should require less verbiage; cabbages are of limited significance and therefore merit a correspondingly smaller amount of text devoted to them or to the regulations which govern their sale.

Some students joined the instructor in connecting their interpretations of the text to a serious world perspective, and, within the
serious interpretive moment, one issue which was raised was the truth value of the text. One student alluded to the authenticity of the facts by asking whether it was true that so many words had been written on the sale of cabbages, and another student commented that the number of words for the Lord's Prayer didn't reflect his particular church's version, which was several words longer.

This issue of the truth value of a text and this text in particular, an issue drawn from the serious world, came under public scrutiny as well. In the late 1970s, an editorial writer in the *New Republic* concluded that there was no "such regulation and there never was. By some miracle, the federal government apparently does not specifically regulate the sale of cabbages at all" (26,911 Little 10). A reader of the article responded however, that

the federal government does indeed "specifically regulate the sale of cabbages." The regulations are contained in the Code of Federal Regulations, Volume 7, Agriculture, Parts 46-51, right where you'd expect to find them—between the broccoli and the cantaloupes (Kemmy 7).

From a serious stance, then, the interpretation of the cabbage statement became intermingled with the value for truth which is part of the serious world. In both the students' assessment of the actual number of words in the Lord's Prayer and the public scrutiny of the number of words on cabbages, truth could be ascertained by referencing other texts in the serious world. For the student it was the comparison of one version of the Lord's Prayer with the one he knew and could recite. For the essayist and responding reader, the truth rested on what each could locate and report upon concerning existing federal regulations.

For the instructor and for those students who interpreted the
document from a serious stance, the group with which students and the
instructor attached their interpretations was professional technical
communicators. This was the professional group for whom the instructor
was preparing the students, and this was the group most students wanted
to join eventually.

According to Bakhtin, interpretations drawn from a serious stance
and from organizations which operate in the serious world are significant
because they bring with them a tacit acceptance of the paradigms operating
within the organizations as well. La Bruyère interpreted Rabelais' work
within the academic literary tradition of his time, and La Bruyère could only
find positive aspects in "the literary, humanist element" (Rabelais 109)
which La Bruyère partially defined as restrained emotion and stylistic
simplicity. In a similar way, Voltaire drew upon the literary tradition of his
time which valued reason, and from a reasonable stance, Voltaire could not
abide a Rabelaisian approach to writing which produced two volumes of
nonsense from which could be drawn "a good story" that was only "two
pages long" (Rabelais 116-117). In the case of the students and the
instructor, the interpretations they made of the cabbage statement which
connected it to the technical writing community drew with it an implicit
acceptance of what this community valued as well. The students and the
instructor could therefore, in their association of the interpretation of the
humor with the technical communication community, simultaneously
espouse and potentially reinforce the value of conciseness held by members
of the community.

The result of the humor interruption into the serious world from the
instructor's point of view was that humor became a force of critique and, by association, the humor also allowed the writing values of the technical communication community to be reinforced. Humor functioned as laughter at the ridiculousness of excess verbiage in the cabbage text, and the technical communicators who wrote the regulations became potential objects of the criticism as well as humor. The writers of the regulations failed, just as the text failed, and the instructor interpreted the cabbage text to emphasize those two failures.

The preceding interpretations and associations that the instructor and students made correspond to the issues raised in studies of humor from a serious stance cited in Chapter Two. Humor stimuli studies eventually led to calls for further information about the immediate situation in which humor occurred (Rothbart). In the technical writing case, the contextual elements which were connected to the interpretation were part of the serious activity which was occurring within the classroom. Humor research also indicates that the expectations of the participants are implicated in humor (Nerhardt, Holland). In the technical writing class, those expectations were drawn from the serious world; students anticipated that learning would occur in a classroom environment and that the cabbage statement could be interpreted in such a way as to assist them in that learning. The instructor directed that learning to the expectations of the technical writing community. Additionally, humor research has indicated that perceptions of humor are related to values (Holland). In the preceding example, the value the instructor endorsed was conciseness, an important characteristic of "good" technical writing.
Participant and group relationships have also been noted as factors that need to be considered in any humorous exchange (Blau, Coser, Draitser). The interpretation of humor in the technical writing classroom was clearly connected to the community of professional communicators, both by the instructor and some of the students.

Technical writing class example -- interpretations from a "humor" perspective

The contextual elements identified by humor scholarship (expectations, values, relationships) can obviously be useful in explaining the interpretations made of humor. But the interpretations previously explored in the technical writing classroom build upon descriptions of the expectations, values, and relationships which are part of the serious world. And the interpretations made of the cabbage statement in the classroom were not limited to connections in the serious world.

The text was also interpreted by some of the students as "just plain funny," and "a great comparison," an attitude which appears to focus upon the celebratory nature of humor and an approach which is more characteristic of the humor world than of the serious. This type of student response would be in keeping with the history of the cabbage text itself, a text more directly connected to a humor culture than to a serious.

Perhaps the most important indication of its roots in a humor culture is that the cabbage text has no author, a characteristic typical of the world of humor where authorship and copyright issues are of minimal concern. None of the 475 documents I collected and examined to describe the office-humor culture were signed by artists or writers nor did they even contain the name of a person who had circulated the document. The ownerless
appearance of the documents is in keeping with the way the texts are often used. People who pin syndicated cartoons to their bulletin board areas or doors typically don't ask authors for permission to use their works nor do they cite the newspaper or magazine from which the cartoon was taken.

In addition, the text concerning the Lord's Prayer and cabbage regulations has been in circulation for a number of years and its form changes. Max Hall, who wrote an interesting essay "The Great Cabbage Hoax: A Case Study" reports that the document circulated in the 1940s during World War II, and Hall traces the item through a maze of bulletins, news stories, and radio quiz shows. For example, Hall traced the item to the business card of an editor of the publication NAM (National Association of Manufacturers) Reports in 1976 and then to its publication in Reports. Hall claims that the item was next subsequently borrowed by FMC (formerly Food Machinery Corporation) in Chicago for their in-house publication Progress, and then was borrowed by Mobil Oil for an advertisement in the New York Times Magazine for April 10, 1977 (Hall).

According to Hall, the text sometimes changed in minor ways. For example, the National Observer published the document in the following form.

The Ten Commandments contain 297 words. The Bill of Rights is stated in 463 words. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address contains 266 words. A recent Federal directive to regulate the price of cabbage contains 26,911 words (Hall 563).

In the preceding version, the Ten Commandments is used and not the Lord's Prayers as in the text the instructor used; the Bill of Rights has replaced the Declaration of Independence, and the number of words in the Gettysburg Address differs. In addition, the structure of the sentences is
not the same from one version to the next.

Hall also discovered that the final sentence concerning the cabbage regulations "began appearing not as a 26,911-word cabbage order but as a 12,962-word regulation on manually operated foghorns" (565). And Hall proceeds to trace the foghorn version. The characteristics that he attempts to track, minor as well as rather major text changes, reflect the type of manipulation that is often found in humor culture texts.

The celebratory focus of the students' laughter in the technical communication classroom was positive rather than critical; the cabbage statement was "just plain funny." This type of interpretation is in keeping with Bakhtin's assessment of Rabelais' world where "bare negation was [is] completely alien" (Rabelais 11). Bakhtin, in fact, is so adamant about the positive and festive element of humor that he chides the satirist who makes laughter purely negative.

The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction (Rabelais 12).

The significance of the positive interpretations is that humor is no longer tied solely to critique as it was in the interpretation from within a serious world view. Whereas humor was formerly interpreted as laughter at excess verbiage and at the writers of the cabbage regulations, this positive laughter shifts the focus to celebration and away from criticism. Students may still have been laughing at the writers of the cabbage regulations, but not simply as a critical commentary on their communication skills or on the writers themselves.

Bakhtin maintains that this non-critical laughter is possible for two
reasons. In humor, the whole world is laughing, so while the students may be laughing at the writers they are simultaneously laughing at themselves. "Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. . . . It is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants" (Rabelais 11). A laughter which is non-critical is also possible because laughter is ambivalent: "It is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (Rabelais 11-12).

The celebratory element students drew upon thus tempers the critical interpretation advanced by the instructor. In addition, the focus upon the whole world laughing directs attention to the characteristic of "shared" laughter.

In the technical writing class situation, students left the classroom recounting the cabbage regulations text and chuckling about it. They seemed particularly appreciative of the fact that the serious mood of the classroom atmosphere was broken and that they could all enjoy a good laugh. Their perception of the significance of the moment of laughter shifted the emphasis away from group affiliations with the technical writing community. Their interpretations of the text were linked to the connections that they made with their classmates and the laughter they shared with each other.

This shift is noteworthy because of the different relationships students would have with a group of technical writers whom the students aspire to join and the relationship students have with their peers in the class. Connecting humor to professional writers, as the instructor did in
his interpretation, places most students at a disadvantage because this is a group to which they do not yet belong. This is a group of experts, and the students' position is that of neophytes in the community of technical writers. The professionals take the role of the all-knowing whose advice and prescription is much more powerful than that of the students. The students become the learners, the unequal participants in the community of technical writers.

In contrast, the relationship students have with one another in this situation, and the relationship they had with each other and which they connected to the humor, is characteristically much less unbalanced. Bakhtin comments upon the equal relationships that are characteristic of participants in humor and in carnival by claiming that "there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men" (Rabelais 15). "All are considered equal during carnival" (Rabelais 10). The element of equality is a contextual component of the technical writing class; most graduate students have about the same experiences as their classmates with professional writing. They have taken academic classes, often times with the same students in the same classes, and their workplace experiences are typically limited. Student relationships with others students are often more joined by their lack of experience in a group of their peers than separated by the divisions and unequal relationships which would generally typify their connections to professional writers in the field.

The significance of this is that within this particular case, the interplay of humor and the existing, somewhat equal relationships students had with each other because of their similar lack of experience, became
intertwined in their interpretations. In their interpretations students drew upon the community of students which already existed but which also already consisted of somewhat egalitarian relationships.

The instructor in this classroom scenario was in a unique position. He was intent upon interpreting the cabbage regulations and any attendant humor in relation to the technical communication community of which he was part. And yet, he was also part of the student-instructor community as well. Potentially, this instructor could draw upon interpretations associated with either or both groups. Within the classroom, he seemed to base his interpretations upon his connections with the technical writing community which would seem appropriate because the technical writing classroom is part of the serious world. But as Bakhtin contends, people can operate simultaneously within both the worlds of humor and of the serious.

For example, medieval monks, who lived and operated within the serious ecclesiastical world, "produced parodies or semi parodies of learned treatises and other droll Latin compositions" within the confines of their cells (Rabelais 13). The reason this interplay was possible was because "the influence of the carnival spirit was irresistible; it made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect" (Rabelais 13).

The implication of a Bakhtinian description of humor for the technical communication classroom situation is that each student and the instructor could hold two interpretive positions at the same time. They could take the position that the humor was a critique of verbose writing and
the writers who created the text, but this would be coupled with a festive, gay celebratory element. The result is that critique or even mockery does not stand alone in humor but is conjoined or in tension with festive celebration. Assertion and denial operate simultaneously.

Such an approach seems so contradictory as to be unacceptable in the reasoned world in which technical communicators work. But while professional writers and current researchers have not yet explored multiple, perhaps contradictory interpretations operating simultaneously for any participant in humor, the approach fits with experiences people have with humor. For example, one ritual form of the experience is the "roast," an event during which a person's achievements are honored while at the same time the person is teased and occasionally mocked; the jokes which are told are "in fun" as well as a "gentle chiding."

In conclusion, this particular example in the technical writing classroom highlights two issues, group affiliations and values, which become part of the interpretations people make of a humorous text. Participants in humor can draw upon a serious stance in interpreting a text and thus connect the humor to groups, such as the technical writing community, which operate in the serious world. They can further draw upon the values which are part of that group and interpret the text to reinforce the serious value system of the group. Alternately, participants in humor can draw upon their experiences in humor and connect the humor to peer groups with whom they share more commonalities than differences. In so doing, they draw upon humor culture experiences which connect humor as much to celebration as to potential critique.
Discussion and implications for technical communicators

In spite of the fact that humor has been largely ignored in rhetoric and technical communication study, continued neglect is unlikely because of the current needs to understand more fully both the practices of professional writers and the theoretical suppositions of social, contextualized discourse which have permeated the field. The opening steps in exploring the uncharted area of humor and technical communication may take a number of directions, and the course I've presented in this study has significant implications for discussions of humor, for the social theory which has evolved in the field of professional communication, and for the practices of technical communicators.

I initiated this study by suggesting that technical communicators will need to describe what they mean when they discuss humor. In the course of developing my particular description, I advance the position of two distinct and overlapping cultures and interpretive stances, the serious and the humorous, which may be brought to bear on humor descriptions. In the process of making these distinctions I connect humor to the activity within which it thrives in offices and institutions and thereby link humor to festive, gay celebrations and to the traditions and rituals based on laughter. I maintain that technical communicators and many of their readers regularly participate in such a humor environment within the offices and institutions in which they work. And because of their active involvement in this culture, participants know and understand humor as festive and celebratory from their everyday experiences.

One question technical communicators will need to address is
whether they are willing to allow this celebratory humor and the office-
humor culture of which it is part into the technical writing tradition. Some
professional writers seem to have already made the choice to do so by
incorporating humor into their technical texts. But what can making such
a move accomplish? Of what benefit is it to bring humor and its attendant
activity into the serious world of technical communication?

One advantage of incorporating humor as I have described it is that
such a step provides a way for communicators to more thoroughly
understand and reach the readers of technical texts. These readers who
technical communicators attempt to understand and reach in their writing
are potentially as experienced in participating in a humor culture as
professional writers. These readers who are also part of office and academic
worlds laugh at cartoons which are pinned to office bulletin boards, and like
writers, they may copy and fax their favorite texts on to others. These
readers draw upon their experiences in a humor culture just as they draw
on those which they have in a serious world. They interpret texts from a
humorous stance as well as a serious one.

In fact, people who operate in technical fields seem to reach out
regularly to others in sharing humor. Professional forums, such as
listservs, encourage humorous contributions. For example, Eric Ray, the
moderator of the tech-writing listserv, to which many professional
communicators subscribe, routinely sends out the guidelines for posting
messages on this specific listserv. He lists six “don’t post this” guidelines
and two “what to post” suggestions; one of the acceptable post types is the
following: “If it is about technical communication and original and
humorous, post it” (Ray). And contributors to the listserv often share the humor that develops in their field and in technical texts. Gwen Gail, for example, sent the following text out to the listserv participants as part of a “more (bad) humor” discussion that was taking place.

Here in Canada, many people are called Denis, which is the French form of Dennis, of course. At one of my former employers (in Hull, Quebec, Canada), a marketing manager whose name was Denis instructed his (French-speaking) secretary to run the WordPerfect spell checker (English version) on his English agreement document, where his name appeared several times in the contract. The poor secretary, though claiming to be bilingual, really didn’t know English all that well, and was a bit flustered at using the spell checker. Her confidence being low, she tended to select the offered corrections, and marketing manager Denis signed the document without a thorough proofread. Consequently, the contract document got sent to the prospective client just the way the spell checker had “corrected” it: with all the “D”s in Denis changed to . . . “P”.

Gwen “It’s so fun living in an officially bilingual country” Gail (Gail)

If technical communicators honestly seek to “know” their readers, they can do so in a more complete manner by acknowledging the humor experiences of their readers and drawing upon those experiences when developing technical texts.

However, in my description of humor, I also contend that descriptions of humor and the interpretations made of it may draw upon a serious world perspective. Certainly the research cited in Chapter Two from various disciplinary areas has approached humor from the serious contexts in which the humor developed; the result is that humor has been shown to connect to the prior experiences, values, expectations, and group affiliations associated with a serious world context. And the contextualized example in the technical writing classroom demonstrates that participants in humor
may draw upon their experiences in the serious world to interpret the humor. What implications therefore exist for technical communicators who will potentially have readers who may bring a serious stance and interpretation to the humor in a technical text?

In an attempt to address these implications openly and directly, I present some of the concerns expressed by technical communicators during listserv conversations and conference sessions who worry about incorporating humor into technical texts. Their concerns, it seems to me, reflect what would potentially happen if readers assumed a serious interpretive stance rather than a humorous one. First, readers might not find a passage humorous. Second, readers might find the humor objectionable because it appears in a "serious" technical text. Third, readers might find the humor offensive.

Concern over the non-laughing reader is significant, but what technical communicators who express this as a problem seem to be saying is that the reader has not “read” and appreciated the humor the writer intended. In effect, the writer has somehow failed to match the reader’s interpretation with his or her own. Certainly, writers need to be concerned about somehow connecting with readers in the meanings each make of text, but what writers are worried about in relation to humor is no different than what they concern themselves with in producing “serious” text. Matching interpretations, as closely as possible, is what partially counts as “successful” communication of any type. Therefore, it would seem that writers can set aside any special concerns they might have about writing humor; sometimes, as in writing “serious” texts, readers take from texts
what writers intend and sometimes they don’t.

Some technical communicators have also expressed concern with readers who will object to humor in a “serious” technical text. And, of course, some readers will object to the idea that humor has any place in “technical” writing. What these readers seem to be drawing upon is a particular description of technical writing as a rule-bound and particular way of writing that can not be disturbed. Technical writing is “technical” and “serious” and humor has no place in it. But technical writing is defined as a field and as a way of writing by those who operate in the field, writers and readers alike. To be too concerned with readers who refuse to negotiate the nature of the field or who refuse to accept change is to limit the impact that writers and readers who do appreciate humor can have on defining the field. In addition, technical writing, if it is to remain a viable field, needs to be responsive to change, and presently, that change is already occurring as communicators incorporate humor into technical texts.

The third concern some writers have is that humor will be offensive to the reader. This idea of offensiveness seems connected to the general values readers hold; for example, a reader may be offended if, as in the Gateway Computer manual example cited in Chapter One, the computer warranties are mentioned as “gods of warranty.” Certainly some readers may take offense if they interpret the passage from a serious stance and believe the writers are out to demean the guarantees that are part of the expensive computers readers purchase. But the potential always exists for readers to be offended, even in their reading of serious texts. Readers are offended when the instructions a writer produces can’t be followed or when the
instruction doesn't work or because the writer has failed to produce sufficient illustrations to show a process.

My central point in addressing all three of these concerns is that the difficulties which may ensue because a reader interprets from a serious stance rather than a humorous are no different than the difficulties writers encounter in producing “serious” text. The problems with misinterpretations or with meeting the expectations of the readers are issues technical communicators meet and deal with in all the writing they produce. Addressing these issues in relation to humor may take time and experience for the technical communicator, but the problems can largely be overcome in writing humor just as they are in writing serious text.

Up to this point, I have only addressed difficulties which might be encountered if a reader interprets an intentionally humorous text from a serious stance. However, such an interpretive position by the reader may also have benefits. As the single contextualized example from the technical writing class illustrates, humor from a serious interpretive position can bring groups from the serious world together: in this case the students and the professional writers from the technical writing community. Humor can, as the instructor's interpretation demonstrates, promote the values of that professional writing community.

But perhaps more importantly, an understanding that a groups' affiliations/values from the serious world may be part of the interpretations readers make can help writers more carefully scrutinize their writing. The possibility of a serious interpretive stance can highlight for the writer the affiliations and values that they might be endorsing from the readers'
serious perspective. The significance of this is that writers can more thoughtfully examine their own values as well as those of any potential reader.

In my description of humor and the two interpretive perspectives that might be brought to any reading of a text, I have further suggested that these two cultures always potentially intersect. In the serious environment of technical communication, humor becomes an interruptive force, and this interruption can be seen both textually and in the multiple interpretations readers make. The significance of the position I take has particular relevance for the social theory which has developed in professional communication.

The primary impact is that the picture I draw complicates the view of the kairotic moment and the organizational, corporate cultures and the larger social culture in which the time and place are embedded. By posing two interpretive cultures upon which writers and readers draw, kairos and all of its attendant cultures now consist of two describably distinct but intersecting cultures, and not simply the one we have assumed from a serious stance.

The implication of this for the social theory which has been adopted by technical communicators is that this theoretical position will need to be expanded to include both the serious and the humor culture and the interpretations that can be drawn from each. For researchers advancing a social theory, the implication will be that the connections they make concerning discourse and its links with elements of, for example, a serious corporate culture will need more careful scrutiny. For example, a researcher
interpreting a humorous in-service training video may need to "read" the humor the viewers take from the video not simply as a method of achieving serious corporate goals of indoctrination but as a humor viewers interpret as simply celebration and festivity. And because humor and the serious intersect, the researcher may possibly have to account for the humor in both ways. This task will not be easy because it problematizes the clear, concise picture researchers and theorists seek.

This expansion of social theory will also mean that researchers within a corporate setting will have to explore multiple and intersecting contexts. They will need to acknowledge the values, expectations, prior experiences, and group affiliations of both the humor culture and the serious corporate culture in order to understand the meanings workers make of texts.

Perhaps the most significant impact of the approach I develop in this study is that once the kairotic moment and all of the contextualized activity in which it is embedded open up to include a second context and interpretive stance for humor, the following question may be raised. If kairos includes more than one interpretive stance, can it include even more than the two I have suggested? My as yet unresearched contention is that the answer is a definitive yes. And the most fruitful areas of exploring multiple contexts operating at any given time and place seem to rest in the electronic communication communities in which technical writers and readers participate: specifically, in the listservs writers and readers join and in the groups they temporarily form through the Internet. In effect, the time and place of any moment may be comprised of several interpretive stances, each one a part of particular activity which will need to be explored and
each of which participants may draw upon in their interpretations. In addition, just as humor and its culture interrupts the serious, these other potential contexts may interrupt and impact any communication.

Obviously the implications I suggest for an expanded social theory deserve further investigation and speculation, but I momentarily leave this somewhat abstract realm to focus upon the practical implications of the approach to humor that I have developed. I do so because it is also the practice of incorporating humor into technical texts that is at issue for communicators. What I offer in this next section are not rules for writing humor but merely directions professional writers might take in their considerations of humor.

The interruption of humor into serious technical texts can already be observed at a textual level. Technical communicators might therefore understand the humor culture of their readers more completely by examining the themes, subject matter, and forms which permeate humor in the environments of their readers. Once they have identified the humor culture more fully, writers might draw upon the themes, etc. in producing their documents.

For example, a writer who wishes to include humor in an internal document such as a set of instructions for using a computer might draw upon the type of humor already present and prevalent in the particular organization or institution. In an academic environment such as an English department, educators may use and be comfortable with a subtle satire similar to the type which appears in the canon of literature they read and teach. In addition, specific subject matter such as grammar might be
regularly parodied by staff members because of its relevance or irrelevance to the teaching activities of the educators. In a laboratory setting in which precision and accuracy are critical, scientists or technicians may regularly incorporate verbal humor related to the reliability of testing or the significance of abstract scientific principles and technical communicators might take advantage of this in their writing of humor. In other words, communicators can build upon the humor culture which already operates at any specific site.

The context of any particular place is also part of the larger disciplinary field of which it is part, and a professional communicator could also draw upon the type of humor typical in the discipline and the members' views of their own field. One way to explore this humor is to examine the journals which circulate among professionals. For example, a popular humor magazine for nurses, titled *Journal of Nursing Jocularity*, develops a type of "coping" humor for its readers. A substantial number of jokes reference the unpleasant tasks of cleaning up after patients, handling death, or ineffective medical procedures. The members' view of their discipline, tied in this case to survival themes and to nurse and doctor roles as healers and life-savers, thus becomes a potential arena from which technical communicators can develop humor.

Disciplines and organizations are also part of the larger social arena, and technical communicators might also look to the humor which occurs in the general social milieu. For example, syndicated cartoons, TV sitcoms, and widely circulated movies and videos and the humor which is developed can become potential sources for the humor technical communicators
incorporate. This approach, in fact, has already been employed by the writer who incorporated the "Vulcan nerve pinch" into a text.

Professional writers might also draw upon the forms which are typically part of a humor culture, particularly the cartoon, to signal a humorous interpretation. This form, it would seem, has particular potential for assisting writers and readers because it is not typically part of the writing or the reading of "serious" texts. Further, the cartoon form is becoming more familiar to readers as a humor signal because it is currently and successfully being used in the popular *Dummies* series with which many computer users are familiar.

In addition, because humor is part of a large and connecting range of readers' prior experiences and interpretations, a humor environment, writers may wish to build a type of humor culture into their document. What this means is that writers may develop a continuing thread of humor through a document, a series of cartoons or one-liners strategically and similarly positioned within the text to indicate humor. Two technical texts currently incorporate this strategy and both texts seem to have elicited positive response from readers. One is a lawn care manual from the Minnesota Extension Service titled *Six ways to a happy, healthy lawn*. The cover of the manual includes an illustration of a blade of grass with a caricature face, and throughout the manual the face and the blade of grass character are altered in six different ways to demonstrate the point of each chapter (see Figure 11). For example, in the chapter on watering the grass, the blade of grass includes arms and a sprinkling can, and the grass is pictured as liberally sprinkling itself with water. In the chapter on dethatching a lawn,
4 Dethatch

5 Water

Comb away thatch and along with it your pest problems.

Morning watering will save water and prevent disease.

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Figure 11: Sample caricatures from a lawn guide (SIX)

The blade of grass is attempting to comb through its unruly "hair" to remove the dead leaves and vegetation.

The other document is a safety manual used in an elementary electronics class. An engineering student who heard that I was interested in humor in technical texts brought me his copy of the manual because, according to the student, he and other students in the engineering class appreciated the fact that the writer had gone to the trouble of taking some of the "dryness" out of the subject for them. The writer of this document develops a rhetorical strategy of placing a humorous comment at the end of paragraphs; in fact, within three pages, the writer adds five humorous tag comments, each of which references material discussed in the particular
paragraph. For example, in a section on the high voltage present within the picture tubes of television sets, the writer warns:

Do not think about fooling around with the TV set unless you are very knowledgeable and have proper instrumentation available. Although efforts have been made to make access to the high voltage sections "foolproof" I have found the "fools" are so ingenuous that they can easily outflank any deterrent (Electronic).

In another paragraph discussing circuit breaker protection devices, the writer concludes the lengthy paragraph with the following sentences:

If one wishes to live in constant danger and relearn the hard lessons of the late 19th century that led to the creation of the National Electrical Code, then replace your circuit protection devices with conductors. Please do not invite others inside, and do not insure with the same company I use (Electronic).

The preceding suggestions may provide a beginning point for technical communicators in their investigations and in the decisions they make in writing humor. But, in many ways, readers of technical texts are no different than writers in that all potentially make laughable interpretations of texts. And writers can also build upon the shared commonality they share with their readers and at least partially rely upon their own experiences with humor. They can employ the same technique many now use for writing "serious" technical texts. They can ask themselves what their own interpretations might be of a passage, and they can ask colleagues and potential readers for their opinions. In particular, women and men may need to consult each other because, as one male communicator who adds humorous bits to technical texts indicated, "women don't always find the same things funny that men do. Before I release anything, I ask several women for their reactions" (Watt). Such an approach takes into account different group affiliations and values held by women and men in society.
Technical communicators operate in a river of words. What has been overlooked is at least one tributary or underground stream which contributes to the river, the world of humor, which brings with it a laughable perspective, and one in which writers and readers actively participate on a regular basis. Acknowledging this tributary will be a first step; it will be a recognition that technical communicators operate in an extremely complex body of water. Using what we know about the river will be the second step; and while the challenge of dealing with complexity is enormous, the results may provide both writers and readers a significant means of understanding each other in a more complete manner. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out, "The popular carnival principle is indestructible -- it still continues"; it behooves technical communicators to attempt to understand themselves and their readers in the most complete possible sense (Rabelais 33).
NOTES

Chapter One

1 In selecting these particular examples, I am omitting what I would term inadvertent humor in technical documents, the type of humor that develops when words are omitted or when typos occur. An example of such inadvertent humor would be the following: from the instructions with a food processor — “Blades are sharp; keep out of children” (Gallagher). I omit this type of humor because it is not tied to the rhetorical choices technical communicators are making. Furthermore, my point in this section is to illustrate that technical communicators are deliberately attempting to integrate a lighter touch in their communications, and inadvertent humor is not relevant for my purposes.

2 Ann Gill attributes the view of language as doxa to the early Sophists who viewed truth as unknowable except through language. For contemporary scholars, the truth-creating role of rhetoric and language is linked to a view of rhetoric as epistemic. (For further discussion, see Thomas B. Farrell, and Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins.)

3 Rubens’ primary concern is the ethical use of cartoons in technical information, and he explores cultural knowledge and two of the five rhetorical elements, invention and disposition, to develop practical guidelines for communicators.

4 A few scholars such as Northrop Frye and Arthur Koestler create a special place for humor. In his discussion of the comic, Frye creates a separate world, and Koestler argues that humor encompasses a different interpretive framework distinct from the serious.

Chapter Two

5 The quotations which I use as the Classicists’ commentary on humor might be faulted because “humor” with its contemporary connections did not exist during the Classical period. Hippocrates and his successors used “humour” to mean the liquid flowing through the human body. If the four humours, blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile were in accord, a person was healthy. A person was either “in-humour,” healthy, or “ill-humoured,” filled with disease. During the Middle Ages, the association between humour and medicine disappeared, and the word was used more generally to indicate an individual’s disposition or temperament. From this meaning developed the additional concept of humor as a pleasing entity (Leacock 17-18). Today, we use the word humor to indicate both a comical or amusing thing, a jest or witty remark, and to characterize a temporary
or amusing thing, a jest or witty remark, and to characterize a temporary state, as in ill-humored or good-humored. And while the ancient rhetoricians could not have utilized the word humor exactly as we do, they did examine comical entitles, and they were concerned with the results of comic discourse on listeners' dispositions. The connections between the classicists' use of the word "comedy" and "laughter" are so closely related to our present concepts that several translators of the classical texts actually use the word "humor" as a synonym for "the laughable."

Aristotle employs the pain-pleasure dichotomy in Poetics, although he attempts to restrict humor's use as a rhetorical tool to a "deformity not productive of pain or harm to others" (644).

The concept of pain and pleasure is repeated in other passages in Philebus as well. "Hence our argument now makes it plain that in laments and tragedies and comedies—and not only in those of the stage but in the whole tragicomedy of life—as well as on countless other occasions, pains are mixed with pleasures" (Philebus 50b). The same idea occurs when Socrates asks Protarchus "... do you realize that here again we have a mixture of pain and pleasure?" (Philebus 48a).

The superiority approach continues to be explored by contemporary researchers. (See LaFave, Haddad, and Maesen for a review of superiority experiments.) Even an explanation of an episode of Pantagruel, a text by Rabelais, makes use of Hobbes' sudden glory explanation to describe Pantagruel's swelled head (Hallett 339).

Sigmund Freud has been the most influential scholar to articulate a description of humor as release or relief. His writings include Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, and an essay titled "Humour" in Character and Culture, written 23 years later. The first work, and the most often referenced, is a comparison of what occurs in dreams to what occurs in wit, and Freud posits two basic techniques to explain wit: condensation and modification. Condensation refers to the introduction of a substitute or composite word such as anecdotage for anecdote or datage. Modification refers to a slight change of a word such as tete-a-bete for tete-a-tete (Jokes 641-45). Both of these categories are designed to examine the double meanings of words and different joke techniques. But after analyzing the techniques of jokes, Freud explores the relationship of jokes to the unconscious, primarily claiming that pleasure from jokes is derived from relief from psychical expenditures that already exists and from the economizing of the psychical expenditures that is about to be called upon (what Freud refers to as a saving in expenditure of affect) (Jokes 745-61).
In less technical terms, Freud seems to be suggesting that at any given moment, an individual can potentially react with a variety of emotions; the response at any given time might be pity, anger, fear, frustration, or humor, all of which seem to contain and require, for their release, an expenditure of psychic effort. Some emotions, however, require more psychic effort than others; fear and anger, for example, require more effort than humor. If an individual is anticipating a strong emotional effect such as fear, and, instead recognizes a ludicrous aspect of a situation (humor), the individual's anticipations will be deceived, a joke will be made, and the individual will be saved from feeling the strong emotion of fear. The result is that the joke or jest overrode the other strong emotion, and because less psychic energy was required, the results were pleasurable.

Freud's later essay is much more focused upon humor (as opposed to wit or jokes), but the same theme runs through this work; the origin of pleasure from humor comes from a saving of expenditure of feeling, a relief because the individual was saved from feeling a different, stronger emotion such as fear (Jokes 712-13).

But in addition to offering a description of humor as relief or release, Freud positions humor in a positive light in this essay. Exploring the role of the ego and super-ego, Freud maintains that the superego sits at the core of the ego, generally acting as a parent, holding the ego in check. The humorous attitude consists of removing the emphasis on the ego and transferring the accent to the super-ego. What this allows is an empowerment of the super-ego which can now alter or suppress the generally negative potential reactions of the ego (which could, again, be fear, anger, etc.). In effect, the role of humor is to allow the super-ego to protect the ego from suffering (Humour 268-69).

Freud's conception of humor has currently become so attractive that research based on humor as relief is even developing in unique areas such as health care. Researchers in the Health Education Department at the University of California in Santa Barbara have developed "The Laughter Project," and the project's purpose is to investigate the effectiveness of laughter as a stress management tool. While much of the research effort relies heavily upon laughter as an arousal experience involving increased respiratory and muscular activity, the project's primary assumption is that a state of relaxation follows mirth producing incidents; consequently, humor may be a positive stress reducer (Laughter Project). Contemporary researchers from the organization the American Association for Therapeutic Humor additionally claim that humor has "constructive physiologic effects on the body. Circulation and digestion improve, the respiratory and muscular systems get an excellent workout, and blood pressure is reduced" (American).
Some of the health care research draws as much upon Herbert Spencer's pioneering work in physiology as it does upon Freud. In the mid 1800s, Spencer connected humor (or laughter) to functions of the body. He wanted to investigate the physiology of laughter, and, specifically, to ask the question why, when we are greatly delighted, do our facial and chest muscles contract. His assumption was that the nervous system acts on the muscles, with or without the guidance of the will. The emotion generated by a laughing situation takes control of the body's movements. Spencer posits three channels for nerves in a state of tension (pain or pleasure): they may pass the excitement to other nerves which have no direct connections with bodily members; they may pass the excitement to one or more of the motor nerves and cause muscular contractions; or they may pass the excitement to the nerves which supply the viscera.

Some of the elements which I describe in this section are taken from approaches which do not typically connect their explanations to a specific interpretive moment; in other words, arousal or incongruity theories that I bring in are not contextualized accounts of humor. However, even the empirical studies and the single account versions of humor can help describe features of a situation which might assist technical communicators in understanding humor. Consequently, I draw upon these studies freely, but I also acknowledge that any particular researcher's account was probably embedded in a different rhetorical stance than the one which I am using.

Mahadev Apte, an anthropologist currently working in the field of humor, discusses an interesting tool that anthropologists might use for exploring additional aspects of participant relationships. What follows in this note is an explanation of the tool he recommends, a methodology which technical communicators might employ as part of any contextualized research they conduct.

Apte identifies a joking relationship and then relates it to kin and non-kin relationships. The joking relationship is the following:

a patterned playful behavior that occurs between two individuals who recognize special kinship or other types of social bonds between them. It displays reciprocal or nonreciprocal verbal or action-based humor including joking, teasing, banter, ridicule, insult, horseplay, and other similar manifestations, usually in the presence of an audience (Humor 30-31).

According to Apte, anthropologists divide the joking relationship into two descriptive categories -- those based on kinships (marriage or family related ties as well as similar social group relations, particularly in preliterate societies) and those that are non-kinship related (relationships
between those not kinship related but who established social bonds in large-scale, complex industrial societies) (*Humor* 31).

Certain characteristics typify and separate the kin from the non-kin relationship. Kin-related joking relationships are bound by kinship-based conventions within the culture. A person's obligations, responsibilities, duties, rights and privileges, and potential marriage bonds are largely, if not totally, determined by the kinship network. The joking relationship is therefore tied in with other manifestations of kinship. In addition, kinship joking relationships seem "more formalized, structured, and institutionalized" and more "obligatory" than non-kin relationships (*Humor* 31).

By comparison, non-kin joking relationships are person oriented rather than kin-centered, and the joking relationship appears to be voluntary (*Humor* 31). This relationship is "not as tied to other aspects of social structure and does not have to be highly institutionalized" (*Humor* 32). The non-kin joking relationship has further been described as a "behavioral attribute of friendship or other similarly close associations and thus carries positive motives" (*Humor* 32). In addition, the non-kin is distinct from kin in that "familiar and humorous exchanges are a means for interacting persons to alter, create and structure social relations" (J. Freedman 1977: 155) (*Humor* 32-33).

This type of anthropological inquiry seems to have particular relevance for technical communicators or at least presents an avenue of exploration. Since the majority of technical communication occurs among non-kin participants, and since non-kin joking relationships are much less structured by the conventions of the culture, humor among non-kin would seemingly be characterized by a freedom not typical of kin-based relationships. In addition, the humor itself would seem to be less likely to be standardized. While kin-related groups sometimes rely on the same funny stories repeatedly told at family gatherings, non-kin stories might be much more inclusive of a wide-range of joke-telling and witticisms. Future technical communication researchers might profitably employ the kin and non-kin joking relationship concept to investigate the characteristics of humor in technical texts. Does the humor seem to reflect a broad range of cultural attitudes? Is the humor far-reaching in subject matter and form?

18 W.M. Martineau presents an interesting model for discussing the inter-relationships of individuals in groups and the functions humor seems to serve, and Draitser draws upon this model in his research. According to Martineau, the functions of humor vary according to the judgments made of it by the group. When the humor is judged as esteeming the ingroup, it functions to solidify the group. When the humor is judged as disparaging the ingroup, it may function in any of the following ways: 1) to control ingroup behavior; 2) to solidify the ingroup; 3) to introduce or foster
conflict already present in the group; 4) to foster demoralization and social
disintegration of the group. Conversely, when humor is judged as esteeming
an outgroup, it functions to solidify the group. When the humor is judged
as disparaging an outgroup, it may function to either increase morale and
solidify the ingroup or to introduce and foster a hostile disposition toward
that outgroup (116-123).

Martineau’s theory should not be viewed as a static concept of group-
humor interaction, but technical communicators might use the preceding
premises as guides in thinking through a situation or in their own research.

Chapter Three

The use of the word "comedy" as a synonym for "humor" in this
dissertation may seem a distortion because "comedy" can and has been
viewed as a structured, organized production played out on stages such as
the Guthrie. I use the terms interchangeably in my discussion for the
following reasons:

First, humor scholarship traditionally draws upon what has been
developed in the area of the comic or comedy from literary study; the works
of George Meredith, Henri Bergson, and C.L. Barber are regularly referenced
in relation to humor as well as to comedy. Part of the reason for this is
that comedy and humor are part of the same fabric. In fact, one term often
defines the other; George Meredith’s calls comedy “the humor of the mind
(53). And, quite often, the characteristics attributed to comedy are the same
as those given to humor; Henri Bergson, for example, develops the idea
that comedy is part of incongruity, and incongruity approaches in humor
continue to be extremely popular in humor research. Bergson’s general
premise is that the essential element in the ludicrous is “something
mechanical encrusted on the living”(92). “We laugh every time a person
gives us the impression of being a thing”(97). In effect, we laugh at the
incongruity of the living person and the mechanical.

Secondly, both comedy and humor were born together in the
marketplace. The early “comedies” were played in the streets for the
populace. These plays, referred to as “old comedy,” typically consisted of
phallic processions and performers who sometimes hurled bawdy,
impromptu barbs at the audience. Once actors became part of old comedy,
plays became more sophisticated and structured, but they were still the
entertainment, the humor, of the masses. Part of the humor in the
marketplace was linked to the drunkenness and rowdy behavior of the
participants. And George Meredith develops a similar metaphor for
describing comedy; he claims comedy rolled in “shouting under the divine
protection of the Son of the Wine jar . . . here and there Bacchanalian
beyond the Aristophanic example” (5).
Third, while phallic processions are part of the past, connections between comedy and humor are still made by scholars such as Suzanne Langer. She describes comedy as part of the everyday experiences of people, and these exist outside formal theater stages. "Comedy is an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings, or initiations" (124). In addition, she contends that "the natural vein of comedy is humorous, so much so that "comic" has become synonymous with "funny."" And while "humor has its place in all the arts, . . . in comic drama it has its home" (130). C.L. Barber's work makes connections similar to Langer's in associating comedy with holiday activities, although in this case, Barber focuses upon the Elizabethan holidays which were part of Shakespeare's culture.

Bakhtin is currently read and interpreted in multiple ways: as a populist, an anti-stalinist, a Marxist, an anti-marxist, and as a social democrat. The reception of his work *Rabelais and His World* was greeted and interpreted in a similarly diverse fashion in the 1940s. The work was viewed as "something of a scandal" by his doctoral dissertation committee because of its celebration of carnival, irreverence, and sexuality (Morson and Emerson xiv). His degree was eventually granted, but the book was not published until 1965.

The writer Rabelais was born in either 1483 or 1494, and entered the Observatine Franciscan, a celibate priestly order. Shortly thereafter, Rabelais fathered two children. Pope Paul III later legitimized the children, and Rabelais then unofficially left the priesthood to study medicine. Soon after his foray into the medical field, the Pope granted Rabelais absolution for his "apostasy" in quitting monastic life without authorization and allowed him to lead a double life as cleric and doctor. Eventually, Rabelais was offered a place in a Benedictine abbey, which, a short time later, was secularized; Rabelais then fathered another son (Frame xxviii-xxx).

Rabelais' writings have been interpreted in various ways, but at a simple story level, the accounts of Pantagruel and Gargantua are entertaining fantasies. For example, the first book (Chapters I-XV), tells of the birth and adventures of Gargantua, who mythologically had already gained "gigantic stature . . . strength . . . and appetite" in the legends that circulated during Rabelais' time (Putnam 52). The following text is Rabelais' version of the birth of this giant.

Gargantua's mother had already experienced some unusual physical childbirth symptoms, according to Rabelais, such as "her bottom dropping out, due to the relaxing of the right intestine, the one you call the rump-
gut, all as a result of the tripe she had eaten . . . " (Putnam 68). A "dirty old hag" produced a "horrible astringent" to help Gargantua's mother, and the result was that the cotyledons of the matrix were relaxed, and the infact, leaping up, entered the hollow vein and climbed over the diaphragm to her shoulders (where the said vein divides into two parts) and there he took the left hand path and came out by the left ear. This infant did not, as soon as he was born, begin to cry "Mie, mie" like other children; but in a loud voice, he bawled "Give me a drink! a drink! a drink!" as though he were inviting all the world to have a drink with him, and so lustily that he was heard throughout the land of Beuxes and Vivarals ("Booze" and "Bibbers") (Putnam 69).

And while Rabelais begins his chronicles with a note to the reader that his writings will teach "little, except how to laugh," he also maintains that readers should "weigh carefully what is to be found" in the book (Putnam, 47, 49). According to Rabelais, You then will realize that the drug contained in it is a good deal more valuable than might have been presumed from the box--that is to say, that the matters there treated are not so foolish as the title on the outside would indicate" (49).

An account of those values has been the pursuit of scholars of Rabelais' work for over 400 years, and, while such study is clearly beyond the scope of my present work, Marcel Tetel offers a selected bibliography that may be useful for those who wish to assess the critical commentary on Rabelais' writings. (Tetel, Marcel. *Rabelais*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967, 143-49)

"Bakhtin weaves three descriptive threads through this work. One is a criticism of scholarly assessments that have been made of Rabelais' writings; a second is a limited historical overview of the demise of laughter and humor during the past few centuries; and a third is his explication of the popular culture of Rabelais' world and Rabelais' writings within that culture. The summary I include of Rabelais and His World focuses on the first thread, his criticism, because it is through his critique that he develops the distinctions between the serious and the humorous. His historicizing of humor and his study of the culture of Rabelais interweave with the criticism, but these two elements are not the primary focus of the overview.

Bakhtin's examination of the critics of Rabelais is extensive. However, I focus upon his criticism of three prominent scholars' works: Jean De La Bruyère, Francois Voltaire, and Victor Hugo. These three literary critics are discussed in more detail than others Bakhtin analyzes,
they are generally familiar figures, and Bakhtin's assessment of them is sufficient to draw out the primary distinctions Bakhtin appears to make between the world of the serious and that of humor.

In some instances, Hugo fares much better in Bakhtin's eyes than either Voltaire or La Bruyère. Hugo's Romantic tendencies, according to Bakhtin, allowed him to assert the validity of subjective experiences such as death, gluttony, and drunkenness and thus permitted him to be more tolerant of similar Rabelaisian images, at least in Hugo's early poetry. Bakhtin suggests that it may have been the general Romantic tendency to add "invention to reality, depicting things that never existed" (Rabelais 125) which allowed Hugo to appreciate Rabelais' work. Additionally, Romanticists were typically aware of a work's historicity, and did not attempt, as the Enlighteners did, to remove Rabelais from his culture.

Some scholars, such as Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, have criticized Bakhtin for making such divisions, claiming that he is exhibiting an "increased binariness of thought" with his approach (445). Jerome Schwartz argues that "it is reductive to read Rabelais as a dialectic between official and popular . . . That view begs many questions, and constitutes a paradoxically static reading of the work" (1-2). Suggestions have even been made that it was the requirement of writing Rabelais and His World as a dissertation that forced Bakhtin to make such distinctions.

For the purposes of my study here, I employ the binary divisions initially for descriptive purposes. I do so because, in spite of the criticism as typified by Morson and Emerson, Bakhtin often admits to the coexistence and overlap of the cultures, a point I believe some of his critics miss, and an issue I take up in detail in this study. In addition, the approach I take is an exploration not just of the single cultures but of how humor within the popular culture operates when it does interrupt the serious and official world.

Chapter Four

The technical means for sharing documents has increased during recent years. The advent of copiers allows for multiple copies to made easily, and fax machines as well as the Internet spread documents quickly from one physical place to another.

The following document is a typical example of the multiple existence and variation that can be found in texts. The six lines were sent to me via e-mail in 1995 by a colleague (James).
Avoid commas, that aren't necessary.
Proofread you writing.
Between you and I, case is important.
Verbs has to agree with their antecedents.
When dangling, watch your participles.
Try to never split infinitives.

A more extensive list of rules was given to me a few weeks later and was titled *William Safire's Rules for Writers*. Two collections of texts dealing with the folklore of the office record similar versions of these rules for writers. Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter attribute the source of one of these similar versions (titled *Grammar as Wrote*) to George W. Feinstei[n, "Letters from a Triple-Threat Grammarian," *College English* 21 (1959-1960): 408 (Work 39). A variation of the same text, *How to Write Good*, was also collected in Kokomo, Indiana, in 1968 (Work 39).

For comparative purposes, I've included the *Grammar as Wrote* version below and placed in bold the sentences that closely parallel those in the original e-mail I received.

*Grammar as Wrote*

Dear Sir; you never past me in graramar because you was prejudice but I got this here athletic scholarship any way. Well, the other day I finely get to writing the rule's down so I can always study it if they ever slip my mind.

1. Each pronoun agrees with their antecedent.
2. Just between you and I, case is important.
3. **Verbs has to agree with their subjects.**
4. Watch out for irregular verbs which has crope into our language.
5. Don't use no double negatives.
6. A writer mustn't shift your point of view.
7. **When dangling, don't use participles.**
8. Join clauses good, like a conjunction should.
9. Don't write a run-on sentence you got to punctuate it.
10. About sentence fragments.
11. In letters themes reports articles and stuff like that we use commas to keep a string of items apart.
12. **Don't use commas, which aren't necessary.**
13. Its important to use apostrophe's right.
14. Don't abbrev.
15. Check to see if you any words out.
I also use documents to build an initial picture of the office-humor culture because such analysis has a long history and precedent in research. Texts become the acceptable instruments from which literature reviews for dissertations are developed. Historians attempting to develop a scenario with little first-hand knowledge sort through documents to develop a cohesive story. Bakhtin and others who wrote about Rabelais examined dozens of pages of Rabelais' writings to make their judgments and assessments.

Some of the texts which seem Rabelaisian border on the pornographic or combine ethnic references with urine and feces which are considered "dirty" and defiling elements in the serious world. For example, one cartoon which has circulated is captioned "Two Polacks Shooting Craps." The cartoon depicts two men with stereotypical Polish facial characteristics firing guns at floating feces in a bathroom stool. While on one hand the humor is an outrageous and funny pun on the dice term "shooting craps," an unappreciated ethnic slur is also evident.

Frustration with computers is not the only issue which appears both in office-humor culture and in technical texts. Another interesting issue for technical communicators is the "truth" which gets told in disciplinary communities and which makes its appearance in documents such as the following in office humor:

A KEY TO SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH LITERATURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT HE SAID</th>
<th>WHAT HE MEANT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It has long been known that . . .</td>
<td>I haven't bothered to look up the original reference but . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interesting to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of great theoretical and practical importance . .</td>
<td>The experiment didn't work out, but I figured I could at least get a publication out of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While it has not been possible to provide definite answers to these questions . .</td>
<td>The fellow in the next lab already had the equipment set up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The operant conditioning technique was chosen to study the problem . .</td>
<td>Wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct within an order of magnitude . .</td>
<td>The results on the others didn't make sense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three of the Ss were chosen for detailed study.</td>
<td>A couple of other guys think so too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is generally believed that . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this particular example, the dictionary contains phrases commonly used in the scientific community to establish scientific credibility and to indicate that the researcher has contributed to knowledge in the field. For example, credibility within science is often tied to the empirical testing methods which are employed in research. Two of the phrases in the *Key to scientific research literature* -- "correct within an order of magnitude" and "three of the Ss were chosen for detailed study" -- reflect this concern with observable, testable, and reliable findings. And yet the meaning of each of these phrases suggests that alternate "truth" meanings are attached to this type of jargon. "Correct within an order of magnitude" means "Wrong," and "three of the Ss were chosen for detailed study" means "The results on the others didn't make sense."

In addition, scientists, like other professionals, typically assume that their research, while possibly contingent, is nonetheless valuable and worth reporting as illustrated in the following phrase in the *Key*: "While it has not been possible to provide definite answers to these questions . . . ." However, the meaning ascribed to this phrase in the humorous interpretations is that "The experiment didn't work out, but I figured I could at least get a publication out of it." What was supposedly an advance in scientific knowledge becomes an acknowledgement that the research failed.

In the process of establishing credibility, scientists also call upon others in their field to validate their research. They call upon the scientific truths that are already accepted with phrases such as the following in the *Key*: "It is generally believed. . . ." The humorous meaning of this phrase acknowledges, however, that "general acceptance" may be only "A couple of other guys" who "think so too."

This issue of the "truth" has also become apparent in technical texts such as the following which a professional writer placed in a FORTRAN Reference manual.

Instead of referring to pi as 3.1459265350 at every appearance, the variable of pi can be given that value with a DATA statement and used instead of the longer form of the constant. This also simplifies modifying the program should the value of pi change (Lord).

The tongue-in-cheek approach the technical communicator adopts in the preceding passage subtly suggests that even the most constant of values -- pi -- may be subject to change.

*A study of office humor suggests that in addition to themes such as frustration with the computer and the "truths" which get told in communities, texts in the office-humor culture draw upon serious world formats as well as those typically associated with a humor world. For*
example, humorous documents are found in the following forms which are
typical of texts I examined from the world of work: letters, memos, notices,
instructions, certificates, parking violations, raffle tickets, complaint forms,
baggage tickets, telephone message forms, while-you-were-out forms,
definitions, policies, and procedures.

Sometimes, however, the format seems more clearly connected to the
world of humor than the serious. For example, cartoons are a prevalent
form in office-humor culture; approximately 1/3 of the 475 documents I
examined used the cartoon, and the forms ranged from exaggerated
caricatures to syndicated cartoons which appear in newspapers.

Currently, writers draw upon both the issues or themes which have
circulated in the humor culture and, in addition, the cartoon form which is
typical in office humor.

The cartoon, with or without some accompanying text, would not
typically seem part of the communication strategies technical
communicators use. And yet, even in electronic documents, technical
communicators already seem to be using a variation of the cartoon form,
the "smilie" face they use on listserv conversations they have with other
writing professionals. Participants on the tech writing listserv routinely use
several types of smilies, and this type of cartoon or caricature has become
so popular that a Smilie Dictionary for e-mail was compiled and sent out,
via e-mail, in 1994 (Smilie Dictionary).

This particular text is typically interpreted as an attack upon the
excesses of the federal government and the restrictive nature of government
regulations. But in spite of the popularity of this interpretation, the class
discussion under investigation did not include this issue.

The value of conciseness is so significant that even the professional
organization of technical communicators, the Society for Technical
Communication, makes mention of it in its formal guidelines for technical
communicators. "We dedicate ourselves to conciseness, clarity, coherence,
and creativity, striving to address the needs of those who use our
products"(STC xi). In 1995, this organization had more than 18,000
members and 144 chapters representing 36 countries.
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