

## Heuristics for Using Humor in Design

### ***Determine the desired outcome of your design.***

Consider the desired type of reaction expressed by a target audience member after experiencing your design. Is it political and/or social action? Is it reflection? Is it a personal initiative towards behavioral change? The answer to this, along with knowledge of your target audience's habits, should inform your design of its medium and form.

### ***Humor is not always appropriate.***

If humor is the argumentative tactic perceived to effectively execute the design outcome, in other words, if it has **communicative dynamism** (advances the process of communication), it is most likely appropriate to use.

However, note that humor is popular and thus should be treated as a pseudo-secret weapon in order to maximize its effect. It *must not* be exploited. If the particular context and/or content of the design summons tension, is in some sense intimidating, contains a complex and/or multilayered message, or is coming into existence at a choice time period (usually sooner rather than later), humor is potentially suitable as a rhetorical design device.

The designer must practice **visual integrity**, or evaluating the propriety of both the individual and sum meaning of all symbols used.

### ***It's not about you (being funny).***

Effectively implementing humor as a rhetorical design tool automatically engages the philosophy of user-centered design. Comedians are the rock stars of humor; designers are the doctors—It's not about you; it's about *them*.

Symptoms of not abiding by this heuristic include:

- A lack of consideration for multiple connotations of design elements.
- “Overdoing it,” which signals too much effort, thus associates dishonesty on behalf of the designer (due to its personal nature, humorous interactions thrive on honesty). The commitment to designing for humor with honesty is called the **cooperative principle**.
- Having more “fun” than the audience (e.g. creating an overly ambiguous design, as perceived by the target audience, to portray a concept)
- Providing the **resolution** (spelling it out) for the user so that he/she has no reflection beyond the design. This heuristic derives from the term “**transition relevance place**” which is used to describe the point in which the humorist

“relinquishes the floor” to the audience for reflection and/or laughter. It also enforces the belief that if humor is implicit, it has a stronger impact.

### ***Consider the target audience’s experience with humor.***

The best measurement of success and quality is the amount of appeal created for a specified audience’s subjective tastes. The immeasurability of “taste” for humor contributes to its own significance and power.

Research your target audience’s experience with humor. Some key ways to do this include:

1. Ask audience members how they define humor.
  - Form personas associated with humor genres
2. Assess their life experiences to inform referential cues and connotations for language, subject matter, behaviors and symbol usage.
  - Look for common, current emotions
  - Identify visual clichés
  - Determine how humor will function in the design
  - Hypothesize user expectations then play with them
3. Study cultural specifications right down to their neighborhood.
  - Connect values with timing, status, social role, and **visual literacy**
  - People will find funny what their peers find funny

Think, too, about the target audience’s role. What kind of perspective should they have? Humorous interactions are capable of consisting of three stakeholders: **designers, users, and audience members**. In some situations that require heavy user engagement, a designer can design a *platform* for *users* to practice humorous design with *audience members*. Users and audience members are interchangeable and exchange roles often, of course.

### ***Choose humorous elements and/or strategies.***

The origin of humor is said to come from incongruity, or a contrast. Though not everything incongruous is funny, everything that is funny is somehow incongruous: that is, two senses are present that, when coexisting, create a humorous effect. These senses can exist through a number of design techniques:

1. Scale change (size incongruity)
2. **Bathtub effect** - visual analogy describing the contrast of first and last
3. **Script** (a chunk of information) in an opposing context
4. **Visual pun** (a key symbol holding two contrasting meanings)
5. Withholding information (“**second-degree humor**,” leaving humor implicit)
6. **Register humor** – using incongruity between two language varieties or social aspects
7. **Canned humor** – using clichés to show an incongruity of incongruity

8. **Situational humor** – using spontaneity or subtly planning serendipity (incongruity of expectation)

No matter what, the following elements must be present in the design for it qualify as “humorous:”

1. Opposition (using one of the techniques above)
2. **Logical Mechanism** – the parameter of the two senses
3. **Trigger** – the element signifying that something is indeed humorous
4. **Resolution** – the “punch line” of a design, which is to be detected by the user in a fitting matter of time

### ***Success?***

According to humor researchers, the success of humor (whether it’s good or bad) is indistinguishable through theory. Some argue that laughter is the best measure of success, yet laughter is a physiological function that is not always consistent with humor, a mental function. The best way to test success is to receive feedback from the audience in the following areas:

1. If the subject matter or context is heavy, the user should feel release from tension after experiencing the design (**Release Theory**).
2. If the user feels pleasant surprise (amount depends on **visual subjectivity**, which can only be determined by assessment of experience and known connotations).
3. If each humorous element adds to a global humorous meaning (as decided by the user).
4. If the desired outcome is reached or **communicative dynamism** occurs.