

## ***The Real Test: Making Exams Fun***

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Most students say that one of the worst things in college is taking exams. What if we could take this highly stressful aspect of college life and turn it into something less dreadful, less anxiety producing, and yet still maintain our academic standards? If we could convince students that the entire educational process, including assessment, can be pleasurable, what harm can come? Why make tests enjoyable or fun you might ask? Well, for one, research suggests this is a good idea: Berk (2000), for example, found that using exam humor is helpful in reducing students’ anxiety (see also McMorris, Urbach, & Connor, 1985; Smith, Ascough, Ettinger, & Nelson, 1971).

Of course, there are other ways to make exams less stressful, such as giving good study guides; writing good, clear questions that are linked to items on the study guides; and evaluating students’ work fairly. These will certainly decrease students’ anxiety, and although they might not enjoy taking our tests, they will certainly have fewer reasons to be anxious.

But still, wouldn’t it be nice to see students smiling instead of grimacing, laughing instead of crying while working on an exam? Indeed, during my tests, students often laugh out loud or work hard to keep themselves from doing so. They often respond to exams with statements like “I actually enjoyed this test,” “It was so much less stressful than I thought it would be,” and “I never thought I would laugh all the way through an exam.”

Below I describe some ways I incorporate humor, encourage good test-taking skills, and in general make exams less stressful for students. Be forewarned, however; most of my suggestions are goofy. Also, I don’t use every idea on every exam; I space them out over the exams in all my courses.

### **Extra Credit Embedded in Instructions**

Usually on the first exam of the semester, I embed an extra credit opportunity in the instructions. The purpose of this is to reward students for carefully reading the instructions. For example, after providing some general instructions, I might add a sentence that reads: If you have read this far, fill in “a” on number 50 of your Scantron sheet for an extra credit point.

### **Easy First Questions**

I start some tests with an incredibly easy first question, a “gimme,” for which the correct

answer is obvious. This immediately gives students a reason to relax because they know that two points are already in the bag. Here is one example:

The name of this course is:

- a. Accounting Theories
- b. Masochism 101
- c. Engineering Principles
- d. Personality

I do not think the first question necessarily has to be a gimme. Instead, it could be an actual exam question, but one that is really easy rather than either moderate or difficult. This would still serve the purpose of putting students at ease.

### **Funny “e” Answers**

As a cost- and pain-free way to add some enjoyment to an exam, I often put humorous answers as choice “e.” I also make sure to state in the instructions that “e” is never the best answer. This keeps me out of trouble on rare occasions when students actually select “e” for the answer. That, too, becomes a reminder to student always to read the instructions. Again, here is an example:

Freud’s stages were in what order?

- a. oral, anal, phallic, genital
- b. oral, anal, genital, phallic
- c. anal, oral, genital, phallic
- d. genital, phallic, anal, oral
- e. your Taco Bell order

### **“Bubba” Questions**

My source for “Bubba” questions is Jeff Foxworthy’s “You might be a redneck...” material. However, I think Bubba is funnier than redneck, so I use that. I typically put two or three Bubba questions on a 50-question exam. Here is an example:

According to the DSM, you might be a Bubba if:

- a. someone asks to see your ID and you show him your belt buckle.
- b. you’ve driven over 100 miles to look at a hog.
- c. you see no reason to stop at a rest area because you have an empty milk jug in the car.
- d. your mother does not remove the Marlboro Light from her lips before telling the highway trooper to kiss her a--.

I tell students there are no wrong answers on Bubba questions, that whatever option they choose will earn two points. I have, on occasion, forgotten to tell students this, and it really stressed out a few of them; it was especially stressful for international students who had absolutely no idea what I was talking about.

Students really like the Bubba questions, and although it might seem that I am

significantly inflating test scores by including these and other free questions, the average score on a 50-question exam that includes five Bubba questions will only be 1% to 2% higher than the average score on a 45-question exam that does not include them. To me, the benefits of having happier, more relaxed students far outweigh a bit of grade inflation. Additionally, because there is always error in testing, including these questions might help to offset it a little.

Now, you might be thinking, Bubba questions could be offensive to some students, and you might be right. But let me tell you how I can get away with this, whereas you might not: I am Bubba. That's right, I am Bubba. I was raised on a farm in Montana by a scrawny, old cowboy and a tough-as-nails, old broad whose raspy voice betrays the two packs of unfiltered Camels she smoked every day for as long as I can remember. They have their names on the backs of their belts in case we forget who they are, and when we were kids, those belts were readily employed if we strayed from the path of redneck righteousness. Yes, this is my family, and this is why I can have Bubba questions on my exams.

### **Dr. (Your Name Here) Questions**

These are other gimme questions that can be used instead of, or in addition to, Bubba questions. They probably are not as entertaining, but students still enjoy them. Here is an example:

Who is funnier than Dr. Burke?

- a. No one
- e. Dr. Durr
- e. Dr. Nelson
- e. Dr. Nicks

As you can see, I sometimes include my colleagues' names in the questions. (You would need to have good-humored colleagues to get away with this, of course.) Notice that in this example, the alternate choices are all "e" answers, which students who have read the instructions know are incorrect.

### **Student Names/Scenarios in Questions**

I regularly include students' names in exam questions. Although these questions sometimes include information a student has shared in class, usually they contain completely or mostly fabricated scenarios. Here is an example of such a question:

After paying for 6 years of tuition, Jason's parents hope he will graduate soon. They have offered him \$1000 if he graduates at the end of this year. Jason's parents are using \_\_\_\_\_ conditioning to motivate him.

- a. classical
- b. operant
- c. two-factor
- d. humanistic

e. futile

In my psychopathology course, I occasionally use student names in questions about disorders. I do this both to personalize the test questions and to help remove the stigma associated with mental disorders. A disclaimer in the instructions reminds students that the situations described in the exam questions are hypothetical and that if I knew a student had a particular disorder, I certainly would not include it in the test. Although there is still a bit of risk involved, I have been doing it for years without objections, and, in fact, students have commented that it was “cool” to see their names in the test. Further, I try to include each student’s name in at least one question by the end of the semester.

### **Extra Credit for Reading All Multiple-Choice Responses**

Students often stop reading the choices on multiple-choice exams once they think they have found the right answer. Because this can be detrimental, I encourage students to read all the choices by putting an extra credit opportunity on choice “d.” For example, choice “d” might read: If you’ve read this far, fill in “a” on number 51 for one extra credit point.

I usually put these extra credit opportunities in questions that have several long choices, so that students are rewarded for reading all in a series of complicated responses. If they fail to read each choice, and therefore do not get the extra credit, I point out their error when we go over the exam. Hopefully, those students will read all the responses on future exams.

### **Fun Last Question**

I always make the last question on each exam a fun one. Sometimes it is a “Dr. Burke” question, sometimes it is about students, and sometimes it is about things that have happened in class. For example:

So far, my favorite thing in class has been:

- a. milking a goat at the Mid-South Fair for extra credit.
- b. finding my anima.
- c. the story about the boat coming loose from Bob and Rosie’s truck.
- d. the day Dr. Burke broke the projector when she tried to kill a fly.

### **After the Exam**

I think students should take their time on exams and really do their best job. Therefore, every once in a while, if I have some extra gum in my briefcase (I use gum as an incentive during class exercises), I will give the last few students taking a test a pack of gum. Usually they are overachieving and stressed out, their hands hurt from writing essays, and they are worried they are taking too long. Giving them gum lightens things up a bit and encourages them to take their time. This also lets them know that I want them to stay and do as well as they can.

I also reward students who can guess their exam scores. On the day I hand back exams, I tell students the grade range, standard deviation, and mean exam score. I then tell them I will give them an extra credit point if they can use this information to guess their scores. If a student guesses his or her score exactly, I add one point to the exam. Usually one or two students guess their scores, although the record is five students.

### **What Do Students Think?**

To find out how students feel about incorporating humor into my exams, I surveyed two sections of my psychopathology course immediately after their first exam and asked them how the test compared to other college tests they had taken.

Overall, students reported that they found the exam more enjoyable, less stressful, funnier, and more related to its study guide than most exams. Now, in case you were thinking that my exams with their extra questions must be really easy, students did not report feeling this way: Most agreed that it was as difficult as their other tests. Moreover, the average score on the exam was 79%.

I also asked students about how their stress levels were affected by the humorous test questions. Students overwhelmingly stated that humorous questions reduced their stress and that these items were not distracting.

### **Conclusion**

I doubt students actually look forward to my tests, but I am confident they are not as intimidated as they were before I started incorporating humor. Although I imagine most readers of this column might not incorporate these particular suggestions, perhaps this discussion has sparked other, better ideas. I believe it is our job to show students that the entire learning process, including testing, can be enjoyable.

### **References**

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