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The Ethos Of Humor In Technical Communication

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THE ETHOS OF HUMOR IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Within the realm of technical communication, humor has often been regarded as an unnecessary or risky rhetorical device that can negatively impact the credibility of a document. While many other professional fields, such as medicine, computer technology fields, or business have used humor, and humor continues to crop up in "user as producer" documentation, technical writing continues to approach humor cautiously and with little theoretical guidance. In order to fully understand how humor functions, it is important to understand the main theories of humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity. It is also important to understand how humor functions, by looking at Meyer's four functions of humor: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Some primary and secondary manuals have successfully used a rhetorical strategy incorporating humor. Google uses a persona and situated ethos that projects a sense of fun and humor, and incorporates some humor into their documentation. The ""For Dummies"" series is well known and recognized for the situated ethos of providing fun, entertaining direction, while individual authors choose a specific invented ethos for each book written. The three theories of humor and four functions of humor can be applied to humor used in Google and ""For Dummies"". This demonstration better highlights how humor operates and functions in communication, and can provide technical communicators with a tool to use when considering the application of humor in documentation. The application further highlights the need for greater understanding of how humor affects the credibility and success of documentation.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Within any form of formal discourse, Aristotle's three rhetorical proofs play a vital role in understanding the nature of successful rhetoric. Successful application of the three rhetorical proofs, logos, pathos, and ethos, can make a substantial difference in getting an intended message across to an audience. While logos, or logical appeal, and pathos, the emotional appeal, are critical within a discourse, ethos, or the character of the speaker or writer, often begins before the first word is uttered or read.   Within technical documentation, ethos is often established or influenced by variables outside of the text. When writing technical documentation for a large company, the company's values and reputation directly impact the ethos of the text. A company with a reputation for a high level of quality products or exemplary technical support will have a higher level of ethos with the audience in the company's technical documentation than a company with a weaker reputation.

Previous documentation from a company or from the writer can also influence the acceptance of a new document by the reader. With widespread use of the Internet, reviews for everything from airlines to zippers can be found. Reviews of a product will also mention the effectiveness of the technical documentation, further establishing an ethos for both product and documentation before a reader has a chance to purchase the product. This situated ethos can have a powerful impact on how the documentation is received.

The establishment of good character is not the only method of gaining ethos, however. Ethos can also be created within the text of the document itself, known as invented ethos. Often, this leads the writer to create a persona designed to fit the situation and create the

desired ethos within the minds of the reader. Within technical documentation, this form of

ethos is often largely subservient to the needs of the corporation producing the

documentation. For example, while writers might feel as their own voice in their writing should

convey a sense of connection with the audience, the company may believe a sense of distance

with the reader is necessary. The writer then creates a persona that most adequately reflects

the values of the company, but in reality is but a mask of the writer's true self.

Whether working with situated or invented ethos, companies and technical

communicators continue to seek ways of connecting with their intended audiences. Companies

continue to try to create an established ethos which most strongly connects with the consumer,

while the technical communicator works to have their documentation both connect with the

company, as well as connect with the audience by creating the correct persona.   While many

strategies for connecting with the reader exist, perhaps none is more controversial or risky than

the application of humor in documentation. Even though the dangers of using humor within

technical documentation are well documented, we have seen the rise of successful humor

usage in documentation. Little research has gone into examining either why some companies

choose to use humor within their documentation, or why it is successful. Specifically, there are

gaps in the research as to how humor affects both situated and invented ethos. This thesis

examines how humor affects the situated and invented ethos of a document, as well as a

company at large by examining two companies that have chosen to incorporate humor into

their technical documentation.

This thesis reviews the literature to date, both relating to ethos and humor in the Chapter 2 literature review. First, I review how ethos affects the effectiveness of technical communication by reviewing some of the key components of ethos and focusing on situated and invented ethos. I reference works by the ancient rhetoricians such as Aristotle, Plato, Cicero and Quintilian and relating them to modern technical communication practices. Next, I examine the current state of affairs regarding humor in technical communication by examining literature and teaching materials that give suggestions on the use or non-use of humor in technical documentation. I then incorporate several examples of successful or recommended humor usage outside of the technical writing field by examining humor usage in areas such as computer interfaces, nursing, and cognitive psychology fields. This information will showcase how, even in professional fields where humor is thought to be absent, humor creates an effective ethos within these fields. Finally, I connect the sources which demonstrate ethos within professional fields with theory, by examining the ethos of humor, drawing from sources of humor theory.

Having laid the foundation for the ethos of humor, I proceed to Chapter 3 and examine the first of two companies that have incorporated humor within their technical documentation: Google. Google, as a company, has established a high level of ethos with the general public, and continues as the most popular search engine in the world. While many specialist tech sources may advocate examples of better search engines such as DuckDuckGo, Ask.com, or Dogpile, Google continues to hold greater credibility with the general public in large part due to its established ethos and its unofficial motto of "Don't be evil." One of the ways Google maintains credibility with its consumer base is through the use of humor within its

documentation geared towards the user. This thesis examines Google's use of humor in its

technical documentation, and studies how this humor is used to further connect with the

audience and increase the company's ethos. I also use humor theory to study the type of

humor Google is using to make connections with the audience.

While Chapter 3 looks at a company who has established a strong ethos with its

audience, Chapter 4 will examine a company that relies more on invented ethos to establish a

connection with its audience. The thesis examines the *"For Dummies"* series of technical

manuals. The *"For Dummies"* series creates documentation for a wide variety of subjects from

many different genres. The company's authorship is diverse, relying on authors from many

different fields. As a result, these manuals often carry their own style and persona. Each book,

therefore, relies heavily on invented ethos to make a connection with the audience. I examine

how the *"For Dummies"* series uses invented ethos to make connections with their audience.

Specifically, I use the lens of the humor used in several of their manuals to highlight how humor

affects the ethos of the document. As with Chapter 3, I apply humor theory to the humor used

in the documentation to highlight what types of humor are used within the documentation.

Chapter 5 studies the implications gathered from both Google and the *"For Dummies"*

series. Specifically, it looks at the wider genre of how ethos is produced and how it is made.

Companies and individual authors have a choice as to what kind of documentation they

produce and what kind of approach they want to use to gain credibility within their

documentation. This chapter theorizes how the proper use of humor might be an added tool

for the author or company by comparing both Google's and the *"For Dummies'"* series success

with other genres. This thesis will touch on some of the differences between print and online documentation as it relates to ethos and humor. Specifically, this thesis will demonstrate how successful humor inclusion in online documentation can help to open the door for humor inclusion in other technical writing genres, such as print.

Chapter 6 discusses the applications for inclusion of humor, particularly in teaching technical communication. As the literature review demonstrates, humor is only cautiously embraced within the technical writing genre, yet many benefits come from its inclusion. These benefits include a potential increase in ethos to one's documentation. Current scholarly approaches either recommend avoiding humor, or note that humor use is high risk. While the latter statement is true, scholars could benefit from an approach that examines when humor use would be appropriate in technical documentation and, perhaps more importantly, how humor should be used. Technical documentation has traditionally been a field with members who are eager to incorporate knowledge from other diverse fields because technical writing is incorporated into so many fields, from cooking manuals to business to aerospace. This thesis advocates a greater look into humor theory to identify how humor works and how it would work best to increase the author's ethos with the user of documentation.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by reviewing the main arguments presented. Some of the limitations of this thesis will be addressed. This chapter also looks at areas where further research should be focused in order to gain a better understanding of the changing dynamic and increased use of humor in technical documentation. The conclusion advocates a call to action for the technical writers and scholars of technical writing to examine humor and how it

can improve the ethos and, in the end, improve the connectivity between developer and user

of technology.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 focuses on the current body of literature in several areas as it relates to technical writing, humor, and ethos. This chapter focuses on research studies previously conducted and summarizes and syntheses these studies in order to form a basis for discussion through the remainder of the thesis.

Section one of this chapter is a review of the use of ethos in technical communication, drawing on ancient rhetoricians such as Aristotle and Quintilian to modern day interpretations of ethos within rhetorical theory. In particular, both invented and situated ethos are examined in detail.

Section two of my literature review focuses on how humor is currently perceived within the technical communication field. This section highlights current and past perceptions of humor within the technical writing community, both in practice and in theory. In addition, this section focuses on the difficulties inherent to humor use across different cultures as well as points out some of the most common stigmas attached to humor use in a technical writing setting.

Section three covers how humor is being used in multiple professional fields outside of the technical writing genre. Professional or technical fields, as well as fields that deal in learning and teaching were chosen to draw parallels with technical writing's goals. This section highlights how humor has been incorporated successfully in highly professional fields, or in the learning and teaching environments, and why humor use was successful.

Section four discusses the major theories behind humor. This section examines the three most common theories used in humor studies: superiority, relief, and incongruity. These theories are then examined and challenged as an effective means of establishing understanding of humor in rhetoric, and John Mayer's four functions of humor are raised as an alternative lens to study humor. These theories are then related back to ethos within this section.

Ethos and Technical Communication

Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee define ethos as the "character" or "personality" of the writer or speaker. However, the authors are quick to point out that "'personality' does not quite capture all the senses of the ancient Greek term "ethos" since it carried moral overtones, and since, for the Greeks, a character was created by a person's habits and reputation" (105). Thus, ethos carries with it more than simply a conglomeration of experiences brought to any given project. It also includes past experiences. Author Sheryl Brahnam examines ethos and the impact it has on human-to-computer mediated exchanges. She supports Crowley and Hawhee by noting that ethos is "a term often treated as a synonym for *character*, *reputation*, and *persona* in the classical literature" (10). Thus, ethos is complex and often difficult to define by modern standards with a single term. The high importance of ethos has long been understood since ancient times. According to Aristotle, the speaker's "character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (Brahnam, 13). Ethos encompasses more than the speaker or writer, it can also include his or her past experiences or credibility. Regardless, as Shannon Walters notes, "[a] rhetor with an effective sense

of *ethos* usually connects well with his or her audiences, identifying himself or herself with them."

     For a rhetor to have a successful ethos, the rhetor has to meet certain ethical requirements. According to Aristotle, "rhetors must seem to be intelligent, to be of good moral character, and to possess good will toward their audiences" (Crowley and Hawhee, 111-112). In order to create a character that seems intelligent, a rhetor must convey to the audience that they are well versed in the topic they are speaking or writing about. If the audience does not get a sense that the speaker has a high level of understanding of the topic they are describing, the speaker loses credibility. The rhetor can demonstrate good moral character "by presenting the information and arguments that audiences require in order to understand the rhetorical situation" (Crowley and Hawhee, 112). In other words, the rhetor contextualizes the information in such a way to make it understandable towards the audience involved. For example, a rhetor seeking to demonstrate his or her high moral character might bring up opposing viewpoints in order to demonstrate that all "sides" of an issue are being considered. This also reinforces the "intelligence" requirement, as it demonstrates that the rhetor has knowledge of the opposition's stance.

     In order to better understand the complexities of ethos, it is important to examine the two types of ethos that Aristotle identified: situated and invented. If "rhetors are fortunate enough to enjoy a good reputation in the community," then they are able to rely on situated ethos, or the power of their own name or reputation, to establish credibility with the audience (Crowley and Hawhee, 108).   According to Brahnam, "[s]ituated ethos is the servant of the real

because it is grounded in reputation and in a community's opinion of an individual that is formed over the course of time" (26). Ancient rhetors like Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian lauded the benefits of situated ethos because it relied on the character of the speaker rather than the structure or content of the speech (Brahnam, 13). One's reputation in the community was considered to be a better measure of how much credence the speaker should be given. If a rhetor lived honorably and seemed to be operating within the best interests of his community, then it was assumed that the rhetor had the community's best interest at heart, and would, or should, hold a high level of ethos. On the other hand, ancient rhetors, such as Quintilian, thought that one who did not have a high standing within the community, who was not "good," could not speak well. However, situated ethos does require continuous exposure between rhetor and audience. Situated ethos relies on "building trust over time by consistently demonstrating the qualities of good sense, excellence, and goodwill" (Brahnam, 14-15). Brahnam continues, "In this regard, situated ethos can be thought of as a long-term relationship that develops in the exchange of ideas between an individual and the other members of her community" (15). Thus, situated ethos takes time to develop between rhetor and audience.

In contrast, invented ethos can be formulated between the rhetor and the audience within a single rhetorical situation. The communicator can "invent" an ethos for a particular occasion (Crowley and Hawhee, 108). According to Brahnam , "Invented ethos is bound to a single instance of speaking in public and involves the immediate revelation of character, a momentary portrayal that may or may not honestly represent the speaker's true character and that may be intended more as the object of sport or as a rhetorical exercise" (14). In this way,

invented ethos can become a more dynamic tool for the rhetor than situated ethos, allowing

the rhetor to establish credibility "on the spot". Aristotle was a proponent of invented ethos.

As Brahnam notes, Aristotle believed "that the persuasive power of ethos is more in a speaker's

words than in his reputation" (13). Crowley and Hawhee agree with this depiction of Aristotle,

noting that Aristotle was "was not so concerned about the way rhetors lived as he was about

the appearance of character they presented within their discourse" (107). Thus, the ancient

rhetors were cognizant of the fact that invented ethos plays a substantial role in how a message

is received.

In today's society, invented ethos is often used because an audience does not

necessarily know the rhetor or his attachment to the community, especially in technical

communication (109). The audience must rely more on the ethos that the rhetor brings with

them to a specific discourse (be it verbal or written) rather than relying on a history of the

individual writer. Invented ethos sought to convince an audience of the speaker's credibility

through the words, language, diction, and presentation, rather than through past good works

with the community. This isn't to suggest that community itself is absent from invented ethos.

On the contrary, invented ethos relies just as much on the audience's perception of the rhetor

as it does in situated ethos. Brahnam notes "A careful examination of invented and situated

ethos […] shows that in both the judgment of the audience is crucial" (14). Crowley and

Hawhee agree with Brahnam, noting that ""character could be invented by means of habitual

practice; but it also referred to the community's assessment of a person's habitual practices.

Thus a given individual's character had as much to do with the community's perception of her

or his actions as it did with actual behavior" (Crowley and Hawhee, 108). Neither the rhetor nor

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the audience is the soul creator of ethos, but rather "readers and writers are co-creators of ethos" (Brahnam, 38).

The View of Humor in Technical Communication

Readers of technical documents often characterize technical writing as dry, uninspired writing devoid of voice or character. Considerations to incorporate humor into a technical document are not considered for most technical documents because of a fear of miscommunication, or of reducing meaning or effectiveness of the document towards its intended goal. Failure to incorporate humor can also be a result of previous education; humor inclusion is just not something that is done in technical documentation. This reduction in effectiveness can take many forms but can include a reduction in ethos. Humor can also impact international audiences, where cultural differences influence readability, comprehension of a document, and the credibility of the writer.

The perceived inappropriateness of humor in technical communication has a long history with many textbooks suggesting avoiding the use of humor in technical documentation. This blanket avoidance fails to allow students learning technical writing to explore possible avenues where humor may be appropriate. Being open to exploring other methods of connecting to an audience is at the heart of Elizabeth Harris' article. In her article "Applications of Kinneavy's Theory of Discourse to Technical Writing," Harris analyzes the practical and theoretical aspects of Kinneavy's Theory of Discourse model to better incorporate the theory into teaching technical writing. She contends that technical writing is often times taught and thought of from an evangelical approach, rather than an analytic approach, and this leaves little

room for further exploration of concepts and ideas (625). The evangelical approach teaches

technical writing to students to accept rigid precepts about technical communication. With

regards to humor, she notes that "We are accustomed to speak of the inappropriateness of

humor in technical writing" (632).   She suggests that the teaching of technical communication

often rejects concepts like humor in technical writing, in some cases dismissing it without taking

an analytical approach to examine why humor is inappropriate. This "better safe than sorry"

approach prevents a real examination of the issues involved in using humor, and encourages a

lack of consideration of audience and the effect humor may have rhetorically on a situation.

Joseph Jeyaraj states that writing is a culturally situated activity (92). He presents the

difficulties inherent in creating a text that is outsourced, using India as a country that deals in

outsourced texts. According to Jeyaraj,

> Since both documentation and product development are culturally situated
>
> activities, outsourced writing and product development can greatly suffer in
>
> usability if those doing the product development and the documentation
>
> accompanying those products do not have an understanding of the users'
>
> culture (93).

If a technical writer does not understand the cultural situation he is in, then he is at risk

of using humor inappropriately, and potentially reducing their ethos with the reader. For

example, an article entitled "Manuals: Lost in Translation" points out several cultural

differences that have to be observed when dealing with technical writing. It suggests that in

other countries, technical documents are more commonly read than they are in the United

States, leading to a potentially larger and more varied audience. The article reports that in some countries, such as Germany, humor in technical documentation is a major hindrance to ethos, as it makes the author look unprofessional and is at risk of wasting the reader's time (2). These cultural generalizations help technical writers to understand and analyze their intended audience, though they can also border on stereotyping. This kind of stereotyping can lead to generalizations about specific company policies in specific countries that may not necessarily be accurate.

Even in the United States, humor is often considered detrimental to performance (Morkes, Kernal, and Nass). They noted that many organizations feel that "[o]ff-task activities, such as joking or being playful, are considered diversions from completing the task and a waste of time" even if the task might otherwise impart ethos to the user (397). They continue by stating that, within computer-mediated communication, the perception is that "work and humorous interfaces do not mix" (Morkes, Kernal, and Nass, 397). Torok, McMorris, and Lin's article also make note of how humor is traditionally labeled. They note that "[c]urrent attitudes about humor and its effectiveness have evolved from traditional perceptions that indicated humor as being virtually useless and a major source of distraction" (14). As Torok, McMorris, and Lin describe, perceptions on humor have changed from traditional outlooks, however in many areas the stigma against humor remains. Morkes, Kernal, and Nass note that within computer-mediated communication, an area where technical communication is a part, "[t]he prevailing notion is that humor distracts users, wastes their time, and may cause them to take their work less seriously" (Morkes, Kernal, and Nass, 396).

Humor aversion in other cultures can extend to the online environment as well (House and Siegelman). Both authors take the role of student and professional in examining their experiences in collaboration. While the article addresses several positive aspects of distance learning, it highlights several negative aspects, such as technical difficulties, as well as a lack of self-discipline and social cues (37). The examination of a lack of social cues led Siegelman to use humor as an example of the difficulty inherent in this deficiency (38). While distance learning is not the subject of my essay, the importance of social cues is an important factor on how a document is perceived and understood. House and Siegelman demonstrate how humor is related to social cues within a culture, and thus how humor can be misinterpreted by an international audience not familiar with the social cues of the writer. Patricia Flint also looked at online environments and looked at both visual and written elements of a document, largely agreeing with House and Siegelman.

This concept of the cultural situation of a text extends beyond the mere choice of words or textual humor of a document. Visual imagery can also be affected, according to William Horton. In his article, Horton contends that, as society continues to move more and more towards a global economy, technical communicators rely more and more on graphical representation to convey meaning in technical documentation in place of written cues (682-83). He criticizes the broad approach which many technical writers have used graphics as a kind of "magic bullet" to conveying meaning without taking into account cultural considerations (684). Horton demonstrates that many mistakes in graphical choices have led to misinterpretation through numerous examples. For instance, the use of a figure with its arm extended upward at an angle was used in one document to attempt to hail a cab. However, to many Germans and

Jews, the figure resembled a Nazi salute. The article advocates the use of purpose-made

internationally recognized visual elements in documentation (692). Additionally, Horton's

recommendations emphatically state the avoidance of humor, and specifically target puns.

Flint agrees. Her practical study created a self-paced online tutorial designed to teach technical

communicators how to write translation-friendly documentation. She emphasizes that using

humor in images is best avoided as humor is culturally based and does not translate well (245).

She provides a list of "sensitive areas" in visual design that help to reinforce her assertion of the

differences between cultures and the sensitivities different cultures may have to specific

imagery. Her research reinforces the precept that humorous imagery in an international setting

can be detrimental.

Research into why humor is not traditionally used in technical communication led to

other areas where its use can be a hindrance to understanding. Vassilis Saroglou and Jean-

Marie Jaspard expand on the theory that greater religious fundamentalism negatively impact

humor creation and appreciation. They discovered that humor creation was negatively

correlated with the religious video experience and positively correlated with the humorous

video experience. In other words, humor was seen as a detracting or interfering entity when

viewing a religious based message. Participants were less likely to accept humor within the

religious video because it was seen as serious material, and was not to be made light of. The

strength of religious beliefs further reduced humor creation in the religious video participants,

but not in the humorous participants (42-43). Thus, the more religiously inclined a person was,

the less they seemed to enjoy humorous messages in and around religious messages. When

confronted with a strictly humorous message, however, a participant's religious level of

orthodoxy had no effect on the acceptance of the humorous message. This study both

illustrates another area in which humor may not be appropriate for a technical document, as

well as demonstrates how context and pre-conditioning serve to stimulate or retard the

acceptance of humor.

Finally, humor use can often be seen as a sign of the writer not taking a subject

seriously. David Belforte describes his work writing technical documentation for industrial

lasers. He laments how technical communication generally opposes the use of humor, and how

that opposition is indoctrinated (28). Many of his colleagues are surprised when he, or others

in his profession, use humor to make points within their profession. Belforte's notes that many

believe that using humor suggests that the writer doesn't take the topic seriously. He suggests

that many who view humor this way often use this justification as an excuse for the fact that

they simply don't want humor in technical documentation.

Most of the literature presented focuses around the cultural elements of technical

writing, and how humor can hinder understanding or offend a user trying to use a technical

document. The literature points to the fact that using humor in a culturally diverse setting

should generally be avoided. However, much of the literature doesn't address less diverse

environments, nor does it make room for the specific audiences or contexts which the

document is being written in. This body of literature does not address possible remedies for

these situations, but merely suggests no humor be used in any technical document.

Humor Use in the Professional World

The role humor has to play in technical documentation has, as demonstrated, been an ill defined one. Technical documentation in general seems to approach humor either as something to be avoided, or from a perspective of caution. However, there are examples within many other work environments where humor has been seen as a positive motivator of action, even in highly professional and traditionally "serious" professions.

Some of the current literature attempts to make an important distinction between the types of humor used in a professional environment. Kynn Keany and Phyl Smith examine the use of the cognitive process in how work is done, and how the cognitive process plays a role in effective work management. This article primarily focuses on a business environment, but its conclusions on productivity and task performance relate well to how a task would be performed in a technical writing setting. For example, Keany and Smith discuss the negative effects of what they refer to as "ill humor" has on work performance and the cognitive process in doing work (13). Ill humor is defined as humor which comes at the expense of someone else, through mockery or other means. Keany and Smith's position is reinforced by Torok, McMorris, and Lin's article "Is Humor an Appreciated Teaching Tool? Perceptions of Professors' Teaching Styles and Use of Humor," which advocates that positive humor can be a powerful teaching tool (17).

Teaching is one of the disciplines closely associated with what technical communicators do. A key component in technical writing is either to teach the user a process to complete a task, or to guide that individual in completing the task. In the case of the former, teaching,

humor is shown to be helpful. Torok, McMorris, and Lin evaluate the use of humor in college

classrooms between professors and students. Torok, McMorris, and Lin study the various types

of humor used within a classroom setting in order to determine whether humor affects

students' ability to learn, and to measure how engaged those students were in comparison to

non-humorous situations. Torok, McMorris, and Lin also looked at the use of sarcasm,

gendered humor, humor in tests, and other factors. The study concludes that humor has the

potential to, among other benefits, humanize, encourage, and illustrate points (19). Jim

Flowers agrees with Torok, McMorris, and Lin. He cites several areas where humor can be an

effective teaching tool, though not all of them are relevant to written forms of technical

communication. Flowers mentions that creative students often benefit from the use of humor

(11). Thus, a creative organization or company may benefit from technical documents written

in an imaginative and humorous manner.

These types of teaching techniques are already being used in some areas. Flournoy,

Turner, and Combs describe a practical approach to writing humor in a workplace setting, and

does so using non-traditional technical writing methods. They argue that the use of an

interactive bulletin board will help stimulate nurses' attention and allow them to more fully

incorporate new procedures (47). The article advocates the use of humor on these bulletin

boards in an effort to "get them hooked" and stimulate interest in the material (48).

However, cultural implications were largely lacking from their examination of the

practical applications. These implications were also lacking from Belforte's article. He believes

humor can be a powerful tool in technical writing. He ascribes to the notion that humor adds

interest and impact in a technical document, and cites O'Neill and Gabzdyl as examples of writers who seamlessly combine both technical information and humor within the industrial laser field, while maintaining a sense of professional integrity (28). The author maintains that use of humor is not an indication of a lack of seriousness or respect for the material they produce. He states that "[w]e think it is much more palatable, and hopefully less forgettable, when [technical information is] delivered in a readable format" (Belforte 28). His feelings mirror those of the article by Morkes, Kernal, and Nass, who state that their study disputes the precept that humor distracts users, wastes their time, and causes workers to take their jobs less seriously (416).

Humor Theory

When examining the efficacy of humor within or outside the confines of technical communication, it is important to gain an understanding of the types of humor available to the rhetor. Much of how humor is received depends on the type of humor that is used, and what kind of effects it has on the audience. Understanding the various theories of humor is crucial to understanding the effects humor has on an audience. It's equally important to separate what a specific type of humor does, or is intended to do from the effect it has on the audience.

Aaron Smuts of the University of Wisconsin-Madison identifies the three most commonly used theories to describe humor and its effects. The first and one of the most recognizable forms of humor theory comes from superiority theory. Superiority theory posits "that humor is often fueled by feelings of superiority" (Smuts). The theory implies that, within humor, there is usually a subject, be it a person, animal, or object, which is placed in a superior

or inferior position to either the audience, or other characters in the story. Lisa Perks examined

the ancient rhetorical scholars of Greece to find evidence of all three of the most common

theories. She supports Smuts' by adding "superiority theory argues that laughter is evoked

from the mockery of people, ideas, or institutions, thus elevating the self-esteem of the amused

parties" (1). Superiority theory claims that this creates a feeling of elation in the audience itself,

for being able to identify with the superior party creates humor. The audience can also choose

to laugh at the inferiority party within the joke, recognizing their inferiority in others, and yet

still find the humor appropriate and amusing. Perks notes that many scholars believe that the

ancient rhetoricians saw humor only through a superiority lens, but her analysis uncovers all

three theories within ancient texts (2). This rigid examination of all three theories, but

especially of superiority theory, demonstrates the power and resilience of the theory overall.

The next theory identified by Smuts is that of relief theory. This theory "attempt[s] to

describe humor along the lines of a tension-release model" (Smuts). Meyer examined humor's

double-edged nature in how it could be applied and used. In his research, he elaborated on

how relief theory works. "From the perspective of the relief theory, people experience humor

and laugh because they sense stress has been reduced in a certain way" (312). Within a joke, or

perhaps within a specific circumstance that a person is experiencing, tension is produced.

Humor, therefore, comes from a joke or punch line that breaks the tension of the situation.

Perks notes "[a]musement of this sort can represent a way to cope with a disturbing situation, a

face-saving strategy during a moment of embarrassment, a form of disguised aggression or

other method of channeling various negative emotions" (1). Relief theory as a coping

mechanism, or as a way to channel a negative emotion into a positive one, has interesting

implications for technical writing, and seems to be common practice among communicators in general, according to Meyer. He states that "[u]sing jokes to reduce tension in situations points to a common application of the relief theory of humor by communicators" (312).

The final theory often described by humor theorists is incongruity theory. Perks asserts "incongruity theory works from a cognitive motivational standpoint, positing that a humorous event or joke evokes laughter because it presents the audience with the unexpected" (1). Put another way, ""From the perspective of the incongruity theory, people laugh at what surprises them, is unexpected, or is odd in a nonthreatening way" (Meyer, 313). Humor is created through a series of surprises, and even when the audience might be in an environment they know might illicit humor, this surprise function can still be effective. However, in order to be effective, the audience must be primed or "set up" in a certain way, either by traditional social convention or by a manufactured convention. According to Meyer, incongruity theory "stresses the need for a rational development of a set of expectations that must be violated before humor can be perceived" (313, 314) and "also suggests why humor is a social phenomenon, because much humor stems from violations of what is socially or culturally agreed to be normal" (314). It is this violation of social conventions or the expected normal which makes incongruity theory one of the more popular theories of study.

Incongruity theory has been further expanded on in an attempt to become a more focused theory. Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin examine why some instructor humor is successful in a teaching environment while others are not. They expand upon incongruity theory by

examining the cognitive processes behind how it works, a term they refer to as incongruity-resolution theory (3). They explain that:

> This extended theory depicts humor as a two-phase process where the perceived incongruity or inconsistency in the stimuli must first be recognized and then accurately interpreted by the receiver for the joke or humorous content to be perceived as funny. This theory begins with the basic assumption that individuals enter social situations with a given set of expectations of appropriate or inappropriate behavior. For humorous messages to be processed and subsequently evaluated as funny, the receiver must identify an occurrence that is inconsistent with his or her expectations for that particular communication context. This incongruity may be perceived as humorous; however, if the incongruity is too absurd or complex for the recipient to comprehend, he or she will not ''get'' the joke or possibly not even recognize that a joke was intended. (Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin, 3-4)

Thus, incongruity-resolution does not just rely on the idea that there is an unexpected departure from a social norm, but also requires that the joke be interpreted properly by the recipient, while not going beyond the boundaries of the social or rhetorical situation.

Incongruity theory can be seen as the most inclusive of all three theories, as "it seems to account for most cases of perceived funniness, which is partly because "incongruity" is something of an umbrella term" (Smuts). Many forms of humor can be included into the

incongruity model. While this leads to a very powerful, encompassing theory, it also leaves it somewhat broad and ill defined. As Smuts laments:

> Three major criticisms of the incongruity theory are that it is too broad to be very meaningful, it is insufficiently explanatory in that it does not distinguish between non-humorous incongruity and basic incongruity, and that revised versions still fail to explain why some things, rather than others, are funny. (Smuts)

Thus, as a theory to base an analysis of humor on, incongruity theory would have limited value. It is likely that much of the humor used in technical communication would fall into this theory, but there would be little way to differentiate the attributes of successful and non-successful humor due to incongruity theory's non-specific explanations.

Melissa Wanzer, Ann B. Frymier and Jeffery Irwin examine both ill and positive humor styles that Keany and Smith and Torok, McMorris, and Lin's articles examined separately. This article compares the use of appropriate and inappropriate humor by instructors in a classroom setting on student performance and learning. Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin believe that Instructional Humor Processing Theory aptly accounts for differences in how students learn in various humor driven environments (6). They incorporate incongruity-resolution theory into their analysis, which likely would apply in technical writing situations, as it cautions against absurd or outlandish humor for the setting in which the humor is used, even if it is appropriate (8). Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin also identify that humor, when well placed, can draw attention specific concepts that might be retained by the student (9). Wayne Decker and Denise Rotondo

also examined the differences between the use of positive and negative humor, especially as it relates to gender and leadership roles. Their study theorizes that the use of positive humor by persons in leadership positions would account for more positive perceptions of effectiveness, regardless of gender. Negative humor, on the other hand, was theorized to reduce perceived leader effectiveness (453-54). Decker and Rotondo suspects that males would be more advantaged than females in the use of all styles of humor due to males generally being more accepting of negative humor, but the results of their study do not support this. The study shows that females showed a greater positive benefit from using positive humor than males did (461). While this study focuses on gender in relation to humor predominantly, the use of positive and negative humor, and how it is affects perception, is the most relevant section in this study. These theories examine in detail the relationship between positive and negative humor types, which were only lightly touched on by the studies of Keany and Smith and the studies by Torok, McMorris, and Lin.

The research above generally demonstrates how dynamic the terminology for humor is. Research like the type done by Keany and Smith or Torok, McMorris, and Lin describe a form of positive or negative humor and works to define what type of humor they are referring to. Other research, such as Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin or Perks describes the three traditional forms of humor of superiority, relief, and incongruity theories and relates their research back to these theories. As Mayer states, "[j]ust as one humorous line may serve more than one rhetorical function, so it may fall under more than one humor theory" (Meyer, 315). Thus, even the individual theories are not completely separate from one another, though advocates of each theory may not agree. According to Mayer, "proponents of each theory hold that it can

explain all instances of humor" (Meyer, 315). Trying to associate positive humor with one type

of theory or negative humor with another theory is neither practical nor necessarily intended

by their creators.   Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin make the important point that "[t]hese theories

offer viable explanations for why individuals find certain types of stimuli funny; however, they

do not explicitly address appropriateness… nor do they explain why humorous message may or

may not facilitate learning" (3). In addition these theories, while sometimes addressing intent,

do not always address the outcome of how humor is perceived by others.

What is needed, therefore, is a method of categorizing and placing humor within an

organizational structure that deals with the rhetorical effects that humor has on a specific

communication. It is important to note that all humor is subjected to the rhetorical position it

is placed in, and thus is often affected by the rhetorical outcome. Nevertheless, Mayer

identified four areas of humor function that exist rhetorically: identification, clarification,

differentiation, and enforcement ("Humor as…"). Each of these humor functions address how

humor acts rhetorically in a given communication context, rather than looking at humor from

the position of where it originated. These four functions also serve as a useful tool in studying

humor within technical communication, as it can lead to a better understanding of what type of

rhetorical effects, and consequences, using humor will bring.

The first function of humor Mayer defines for humor use is identification. This function

suggests that "humor serves to build support by identifying communicators with their

audiences, enhancing speaker credibility" (318). This function of humor seeks to connect the

rhetor with their audience, a goal that technical communicators are always looking to achieve.

A key point in the identification function is the fact that it seeks to enhance the rhetor's

credibility with the audience, or raise the rhetor's ethos, making it a valuable tool for any

communicator. While this function can rely on common points of interest between the rhetor

and the audience, it doesn't necessarily have to function in that manner. It can also be used to

elevate the audience up to the level of the rhetor, or even make the audience feel superior to

the rhetor. According to Mayer, "[t]his often involves speakers using self-deprecating humor to

ally themselves with their audiences" (318). The identification function, in practice, can borrow

from all three of the major humor theories. Self-deprecating humor is most largely associated

with superiority theory. Mayer notes that when communicators use humor to identify with

their audience, they are also doing so in order to relieve tension with their audience, which

associates with relief theory (318). Finally, the communicator can incorporate an unexpected

anecdote, especially when using self-deprecating humor, to surprise the audience, which most

closely associates with incongruity theory. Thus, the identification function readily explains

why traditional theories are unable to adequately explain or categorize the effects of humor

use in a rhetorical situation.

The second function of humor Mayer identifies is clarification. Mayer states that humor

is also used "to encapsulate their views into memorable phrases or short anecdotes, resulting

in the clarification of issues or positions" (Meyer, 319). The intent of this function of humor is

to provide further clarification for the audience and increase retention of the information given.

The clarification function allies itself closest with the incongruity theory of humor, in part

because of incongruity's broad nature, and also because of how clarification can often function.

Mayer asserts that "[h]umorous lines [when being used for clarification] often serve to express

one's views creatively and memorably because they are presented incongruously or unexpectedly" (319). This function of humor carries with it some elements of superiority theory, especially when used to highlight social norms. However, clarification usually seeks to highlight or clarify in a less offensive way, placing "the stress…on the expected norm rather than the seriousness of the violation" (319). Thus, successful use of clarification allows the communicator to use humor to clarify a position without harm to other parties because no party is "corrected or differentiated in such humor, as it seeks to unify receivers of such messages in mutual enjoyment of a mild violation of normal messages or norms" (319). This key functional difference that clarification uses is important as in examining the final two functions of humor in communication.

The third function of humor that Mayer identifies is known as enforcement. As the name implies, enforcement "allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience" (Meyer, 320). For example, this function of humor is used to call attention to violations of social norms. Enforcement is most closely identified with incongruity theory, as it often relies on the unexpected violation of a social norm. However, one can also see elements of superiority theory within this function, as it seeks to elevate the rhetor by allowing them to point out inconsistencies or violations of social norms. As Mayer notes, "[a]ny deviations from such expectations may be seen as humorous and can be held up for ridicule, invoking laughter to discipline those who are not seen as properly following the rules of a social group," which is firmly supported by superiority theory (320). The main difference between enforcement and clarification lies in where the emphasis is placed. In clarification, great effort is put into unifying

various parties and reducing the importance of violated norms, while enforcement focuses

more on the violating party and calls attention to that party and their violation.

The final function Mayer describes is known as differentiation. Here, humor is used as a

means for rhetors to contrast "themselves with their opponents, their views with an

opponent's views, their own social group with others, and so on" (Meyer, 321). In effect,

humor is used further highlight differences between two groups, or as Mayer describes, "is

invoked to make both alliances and distinctions" within or between groups (321).

Communicators intending to unite their audience behind a cause while discrediting the

opposition often use this form of humor. This form of humor is beneficial and can serve a

rhetor rhetorically because "[o]ne can criticize with humor by ridiculing the opposition through

laughter rather than through indignation, anger, or violence" (Meyer, 322). Differentiation

serves to starkly compare and contrast two generally opposing sides, and usually does so

without regard for the opposing viewpoint. Mayer reveals:

> This is the harshest function of humor in rhetoric, as often no quarter is given to
>
> the opposing group. The audience is very familiar with the subject, but is in
>
> complete disagreement with the humor's target. Indeed, harsh comments about
>
> disliked groups are often perceived in themselves as humorous. (322)

Because of its function to negatively portray an opposing viewpoint, differentiation most

closely aligns with superiority theory, as it mocks a specific concept, person, or group, and is

associated with a group that is not the rhetor. For example, self-deprecating humor would not

fall under differentiation, even though both seek to reduce the rhetorical power a specific

group. Differentiation is primarily used to separate the rhetor and his audience from those

outside the group. Despite its harsh nature, differentiation still has the capacity to unite groups together, provided the group is not the "butt of the joke". This is usually accomplished "by implying that "the others" are somehow irrational or inferior," leading to in-group agreement and mutual support of the ideas being conveyed rhetorically by humor (Meyer, 323).

With Mayer's four functions of humor, it becomes easier to identify and classify what Decker and Rotondo, Torok, McMorris, and Lin, and Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin termed "positive" humor and "negative" or "ill" humor. Positive forms of humor seek to unite an audience or seek to reinforce norms by concentrating on the positive aspects of existing norms.

> Many forms of ingratiation, including relieving tension through an entertaining story or remark, promoting good feelings in an audience, and seeking to equalize the communicator-audience relationship, would fall under the identification or clarification functions of humor in communication. (Meyer, 324)

In contrast, negative, or ill humor seeks to concentrate the audience's attention on the violation of norms. They also unite like-minded groups, while dividing groups that do not conform to established norms.

> "All uses of humor to attack others, whether on the basis of perceived irrationality or behavior perceived as wrong, would be categorized under the enforcement or differentiation functions of humor and would stress the violation of the norm more strongly than the continuing effective norm. (Meyer, 323).

Thus, these theories give us a better understanding of what might constitute positive or negative humor.

The three theories of humor, superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory, are important starting points to understanding where humor might come from, but provides little guidance in understanding how humor is used. Mayer believes that "[u]nderstanding [the] rhetorical functions of differentiation, enforcement, clarification, and identification allows more refined and detailed assessment of humor's communication effects than the theories of humor origin do" (Meyer, 328-329). The four functions of humor place the emphasis not on where humor comes from, but rather what the rhetorical purpose of that humor is supposed to serve within a given communication. The responsibility lies with the rhetor understand the functions of humor and how they can affect a rhetorical situation, as "the rhetorical goal influences which key function of humor is applied" (325). In other words, by understanding the four functions, a rhetor can choose which function best suits their rhetorical needs.

Mayer's four functions of humor also play a critical role in the rhetor's ethos. Both identification and clarification enhance the rhetor's credibility though connecting with their audience and closing the distance between the rhetor and the audience.   Crowley and Hawhee remind us that "persuasion occurs more easily when audiences can identify with rhetors. Identification increases as distance decreases," and identification and clarification humor works towards this goal (120). Enforcement and differentiation also can bring rhetor and audience closer together and provide a boost in ethos from an audience already sympathetic to the rhetor's cause. However this is usually at the cost of credibility from the individual or group that is being targeted as the "butt of the joke".

It is within the context of the above literature that this thesis examines humor within the technical writing field. Specifically, this thesis examines the interrelation between humor

and ethos plays an important role in how a message is received by the user. In the next

chapter, I will look at Google's situated ethos, how it formed, and how it uses humor to

reinforce or detract from the company's ethos.

CHAPTER 3: *GOOGLE*: DESIGNING AN ETHOS FOR THE WORLD

Within both the virtual and non-virtual world today, there are few names as well known as Google. Only social media outlets, such as Twitter and Facebook, have similar levels of recognition that many corporations throughout the world seek to emulate. The success Google has created has stemmed from a variety of factors which include successful marketing, brand recognition, and their innovative method of providing search results and how they make money through advertising. In addition to these methods, Google has developed a corporate mission that promotes diversity, creativity, and an open cultural outlook that provides the company a certain level of credibility, or ethos, with both consumers and the advertisers that use its services.

One of the reasons Google has been so successful in creating an ethos that compels people to use their products over and over again is the sense of light-heartedness they take towards some of their products. Google often uses humor to poke fun at themselves in order to highlight that, even as the largest and most recognized search engine on the planet, it attempts to suggest that the company does not forget that it is a company designed for the user. In recent years, Google has been accused of questionable practices with regards to privacy for its users, how they rank pages that someone searches for, copyright issues, accusations of censorship, as well as a host of other highly suspicious business practices that either seem contrary to the public's perception of the company, or contrary to the company's own mission statement. Despite these issues, which affects a company's credibility, Google remains the number one search engine around the world with over 900 million unique visitors per month ("The 15 Most Popular"). The next most popular search engine reaches only 165

million unique visitors per month from around the world. Thus, Google has managed to establish a robust ethos with its users that, despite some of the questionable decisions made by the company, continue to bring people back to use the product. This robustness continues in large part because of Google's strong situated ethos.

Don't Be Evil: Google's Establishment of Ethos

For much of Google's existence, the company has enjoyed a relatively high level of ethos with the general public it serves. The company was founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin by creating a new and, at the time, innovative search engine designed to meet the needs of its users. Originally referred to as "BackRub," the search engine's name was later changed to Google, in reference to the word "googol," a term relating to the number 1 to the power of 100 ("Company Overview"). Even in these early stages of development, Page and Brin set about establishing the company's style of ethos. BackRub, already a serious contender as the title for the search engine, carries an informality that suggests a lightness of purpose and a desire to help. On the other hand, BackRub also carries with it an awkward and disturbing connotation. The mental image of a search engine being ever present behind the user, slowly massaging one's back makes for a somewhat questionable name (however, during this time, search engines also had names such as WebCrawler, with images of bugs, so Page and Brin did not corner the market on awkward search engine titles). Later, the name was changed to Google, a less awkwardly phrased name, but one that is the misspelled form of googol, still suggesting a fun play on words (though many stories exist on why the misspelling was used, including an unintended mistake by its creators).

Even from these early attempts, the creators of this new search engine were beginning to construct a form of ethos for their users. The rhetorical power of the name of the company wasn't the only area where they were creating the company's ethos. The so-called "doodles," modifications of the Google logo to note or celebrate a particular event or day, takes its roots from the birth of the company.

> In 1998, before the company was even incorporated, the concept of the doodle was born when Google founders Larry and Sergey played with the corporate logo to indicate their attendance at the Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert. They placed a stick figure drawing behind the 2nd "o" in the word, Google, and the revised logo was intended as a comical message to Google users that the founders were "out of office." While the first doodle was relatively simple, the idea of decorating the company logo to celebrate notable events was born. ("About Doodle")

This is perhaps one of the first instances of intended humor by the company of Google—directed specifically at its users. Google used a light, comical tone to suggest something to their users, and once again established an ethos that suggested that the originators of the software did not believe their logo, used to represent their company, should remain unchanged. Instead, it suggested a playfulness on the part of the company.

Google continued to develop their ethos through their products, marketing, and general philosophy, creating a bond of trust between the end user and those working at the company. Google publishes their philosophy openly. The first item listed in their philosophy is "Focus on the user and all else will follow." It continues,

Since the beginning, we've focused on providing the best user experience possible. Whether we're designing a new Internet browser or a new tweak to the look of the homepage, we take great care to ensure that they will ultimately serve **you**, rather than our own internal goal or bottom line. Our homepage interface is clear and simple, and pages load instantly. Placement in search results is never sold to anyone, and advertising is not only clearly marked as such, it offers relevant content and is not distracting. And when we build new tools and applications, we believe they should work so well you don't have to consider how they might have been designed differently. ("What We Believe")

Google continues to be the homepage for many users, as it does load quickly, thus allowing searches to be conducted instantly rather than sitting through numerous advertisements on the homepage before you can conduct a search. In January 2010, Microsoft's Internet Explorer remained king among web browsers with an estimated 55.25% of users choosing its browser over its competitors. At this time, Google Chrome only accounted for about 6% of users. By May of 2012, Google Chrome had surpassed both Mozilla Firefox (the second leading browser) and was equal to Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Today, Google Chrome ranks as the number one browser by users, garnishing over 36% of the total users to Internet Explorer's 30% ("Top 5 Browsers…"). The trend from Internet Explorer to Google's new web browser suggests that Google's first mandate is being followed by designing an interface that is perceived by its users to be superior to the competition. As a result, Google's ethos was initially influenced by the development of a product that people liked.

However, Google's success was enhanced by the rhetoric, catch phrases, and mottos (official and unofficial) used by the company. One of the more famous, unofficial mottos that have become synonymously (or infamously) linked with Google is the phrase "don't be evil". According to Paul Buchheit, who used to work for Google, the phrase was initially thought of as an attempt at humor.

> I believe that it was sometime in early 2000, and there was a meeting to decide on the company's values. They invited a collection of people who had been there for a while. I had just come from Intel, so the whole thing with corporate values seemed a little bit funny to me. I was sitting there trying to think of something that would be really different and not one of these usual "strive for excellence" type of statements. I also wanted something that, once you put it in there, would be hard to take out.
>
> It just sort of occurred to me that "Don't be evil" is kind of funny. It's also a bit of a jab at a lot of the other companies, especially our competitors, who at the time, in our opinion, were kind of exploiting the users to some extent. (Lenssen)

The adoption of the phrase "don't be evil" became engrained in Google's ethos. It not only became an unofficial part of the set of core corporate values, it spread outward to those using the products. Users, beginning with those in the technology industry, and eventually bleeding into general knowledge of the populace, began to latch on to the phrase. It is noteworthy that Google has never officially endorsed the actual phrasing of the motto on any official documentation. However, Google eventually incorporated parts of the phrase into their

official policy, recognizing that this was part of their situated ethos. Number six on their list of

core values and philosophies states that "You can make money without doing evil," which

incorporates part of "don't be evil" ("Ten Things We Know"). The distinction between those

two statements is significant, rhetorically. While the phrase "don't be evil" corresponds to all

activities which Google may be involved in, the latter phrase, "you can make money without

doing evil" does not rhetorically demand that one should make money in this manner, merely

that it is possible. It appears that Google is reluctant to commit officially to the motto they

have taken unofficially, as they know (and encourage) their users to hold them to their official

philosophy. Nevertheless, the idea that the users often see "don't be evil" as the official motto

of Google, even if it isn't, reinforces what Brahnam notes about readers and writers being "co-

creators of ethos" (38). Google never had full control of how their situated ethos developed,

and once the unofficial phrase became known to the general public, it became official in the

minds of many users.

In 2008, Google was named the most trusted company in America, soundly beating its

competitors, including Microsoft, which previously held the title (Spak). This success came from

a combination of factors, including superior products and services to competitors, effective

customer support, and a perceived commitment to user satisfaction. Google had established

itself with a positive ethos that "proves you don't need advertizing if customers see you as a

good citizen" (Spak). Indeed, the strength of Google's high popularity and credibility allowed

the company to spend next to nothing on advertizing, which is one of the traditional methods

of establishing a company's ethos. Having a strong situated ethos has helped propel and

maintain Google's lead in web searching and Internet browsers.

However, despite the company's high popularity in 2008, Google has also lost credibility with its audience. Some of this loss in credibility began before 2008. In 2007, Privacy International rated Google one of the worst Internet firms regarding how it handles the privacy of its users ("Google Ranked 'Worst'"). In a 2009 interview with CNBC, Google CEO Eric Schmidt ignited advocates for privacy and tech-savvy individuals who use Google when he stated, "[i]f you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place" ("Google CEO on Privacy"). In 2010, Schmidt again suggested that while privacy was still important, anonymity online is dying out, and that a lack of anonymity is a positive thing for society in general: "[t]he only way to manage this is true transparency and no anonymity. In a world of asynchronous threats, it is too dangerous for there not to be some way to identify you. We need a [verified] name service for people. Governments will demand it" (Kirkpatrick, 2010). In 2012, Google updated its privacy policy to document the various ways they use information they collect. Google collects computer hardware configurations, operating systems, mobile phone numbers, Internet protocol addresses used to identify a specific computer and where that computer sent data from, location information, and other critical identifying information ("Google Privacy"). This level of information collection and storage by Google concerns many users who are worried about privacy.

Privacy is not the only area where Google has lost credibility. The company has come under fire for violating copyright law, specifically in regards to Google Books, which scans large sections of text from published books and provides these samples online for free. Google has also created controversy among privacy and copyright advocates as well as those advocating more open and free expression on the Internet by its policies on YouTube. Google consistently

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finds itself in the middle of the battle between the freedom to access information and the freedom to keep some information private. While the majority of Google products, such as YouTube, Gmail, Chrome, Android, and the search engine itself all remain highly popular, Google's credibility continues to suffer in large part due to issues that do not relate directly to the products and services they provide. Simply making a good product does not necessarily create a high level of ethos, nor does one good deed.

Despite Google's recent history, they continue to enjoy a high level of ethos from the general public, and their products and services continue to be used. Several Google products like Chrome and the search engine itself continue to rank highly, and many users still trust the brand. Crowley and Hawhee note that "[r]hetors enjoy situated power if they are in a position to influence the ideology of participants in a rhetorical situation. Rhetors also have situated power if they can suppress or divulge information that is crucial to understanding or deciding an issue" (135-136). We see Google using this situational power through Schmidt's comments that anonymity should not be provided online, as well as Google's changing policies towards privacy. Despite objections by some users, Google, and other companies, are using their powerful situational ethos to shape how we view the online experience.

Humor's Role in Google

Whether using situated ethos to mold the way users think about their online experience or to help promote their products and services, Google has worked to incorporate humor into its ethos from the beginning. Instances of this include the original Doodle stick figure to show the creators "out of the office," and the various hoaxes and April Fools jokes starting in the year 2000. Google even added Klingon to Google search as a language the user can search with.

These, as well as countless other examples, demonstrate that Google has consistently injected

both humor and fun into their products.

Regardless of whether Google's ethos remains high for a user, there can be little doubt

that Google attempts to create an ethos where humor plays a role. While not strictly in the

realm of technical communication, Google's use of the Doodle, initially a fun and humorous

attempt to convey a message to its users, has expanded to not only be used for humor value,

but also to inform and educate. Doodles provide an opportunity for information to be

conveyed to a user, while also entertaining the user with a minimum of distraction. For

example, on September 8th, 2012, Google created an interactive Doodle to celebrate the 48th

anniversary of the first broadcast of the original <u>Star Trek</u> series. The Doodle featured several

interactive features, including a famous scene whereby Captain Kirk, represented by an "O" in

Google, and an unnamed "redshirt," transport down to a planet and fight a hostile alien, a

Gorn, played by the "L" in Google. The humor comes from the expectation that the redshirt will

die on the mission, as it was common in the show that the redshirt would perish on nearly

every mission, in order to underscore the seriousness of the plight. The redshirt in Google's

Doodle did not die, though did humorously "nearly die" through a backfire of the weapon used

to kill the alien ("Google's 46th Anniversary").

This example of humor by Google most closely associates with classical incongruity

theory. Whether the user is a knowledgeable Star Trek fan or not, the backfire in the weapon is

unexpected, leading to a black slime or goo that covers the "E" redshirt, leading to an

unexpected outcome. For the typical Star Trek fan, however, the humor is even more effective

because the Doodle departs further from expected norms by allowing the redshirt to live.

However, incongruity theory does not necessarily provide us with the creator's intent without also applying Mayer's functions of humor. This Doodle seems to be attempting to identify with a specific audience, in this case either users who are Star Trek fans or users who are familiar with the redshirt meme. It seeks to identify with the users who have enjoyed the meme or enjoyed the series itself, suggesting that Google "gets it".

Google's Doodles are not just designed for specific audiences with an interest in only one specific genre of knowledge. Holidays and commemorations play an important role in what Google celebrates. Google created a Doodle for New Year's Eve 2010 and New Year's Day 2011 featuring a Roman numeral system replacing the "o's," second "g," and "l" with MMXI, the Roman numeral for the new year, 2011. According to Sophia Foster-Dimino, creator of the Doodle, the intent was to create a pun with the Roman numeral system, thus implying intent towards humor ("Google's New Year's Day"). Again, the use of this system is an attempt to use incongruity, the unexpected application of Roman numerals added to the Google name, in order to produce a sense of humor, in this case in the form of a pun.

Doodles impact Google's ethos by visibly displaying both fun and humorous elements in a section of their website that will likely receive the majority of Internet traffic. However, with the exception of helping a user find information about the topic Doodle is covering that day by allowing the user to click on the Doodle for more information, very little technical instruction is going on. However, Google has created whole humorous pages designed to give its users instruction on how to accomplish tasks. In 2000, Google created its first April Fool's page entitled Google MentalPlex. The instructions included are below.

Instructions:

- Remove hat and glasses.

- Peer into MentalPlex circle. DO NOT MOVE YOUR HEAD.

- Project mental image of what you want to find.

- Click or visualize clicking within the MentalPlex circle. ("Google MentalPlex")

The user was tasked with staring into the blue and red circle located to the left of the

instruction text, a circle which may be either hypnotizing or headache inducing depending on

the user. The page includes links to illustrations on proper use of the new page as well as an

extensive Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page written in a humorous manner. The FAQ

largely relies on humor that is most closely associated with superiority theory, or falls within

Mayer's differentiation or enforcement functions of humor. For example, when describing

those who can use MentalPlex, the FAQ states:

MentalPlex can be used by anyone on the Internet but this technology is especially useful

for:

- [I]nfants, Luddites, chimpanzees and other primates who can't type

- [P]eople who know what they want but have problems expressing

themselves clearly (e.g., shy persons, 14-year-old boys and actors accepting

Academy Awards) ("Google MentalPlex FAQ")

This passage clearly demonstrates humor derived from a superiority stance, where the

rhetor is associating infants and chimpanzees with those who are dismissive or mistrustful of

technology, and also singling out other groups who have trouble expressing themselves. This

example also shows a fairly mild form of differentiation by the author. The act of lumping

Luddites with infants and chimpanzees (and other primates) implies a kind of sub-human

quality to users who don't embrace advances in technology.

The Troubleshooting section of the FAQ also includes large doses of humor, for

example:

> **Problem:** MentalPlex keeps taking me to sites featuring rubber toys, nipples
>
> and diapering.
>
> **Answer:** Your infant is too close to the monitor. If you have no children, you
>
> may want to consider counseling. ("Google MentalPlex FAQ")

Here, we again see a style of humor that largely fits in with superiority theory.

Differentiation is also present in this example, though not quite as clearly as the previous

example. The passage is not singling out a particular group of individuals directly, but rather

poking fun at adult users who might violate social norms by having an interest, conscious or

otherwise, in products that are traditionally for toddlers or infants. This use of humor to

suggest that those adult users may be violating a social norm most closely associates with the

enforcement function of humor.

Both of these examples and much of the FAQ rely heavily on using the superiority of the

rhetor and the majority of the audience to poke fun at a select few who are likely not the

audience of the FAQ. However, while these examples are written in a technical style, including

directions as well as troubleshooting and FAQ sections, they are not intended for serious

consumption as legitimate technical documentation. It is important to examine Google's actual

technical documentation for humor.

One of the areas users of Google have discovered the use of humor is in Google Maps. One of the most comprehensive online mapping programs, Google Maps provides a top-down view of the world at large and allows users to explore most of the Maps, and even other celestial bodies like the Moon (with the equally descriptive name, Google Moon). Google Maps allows users to type in an origin and destination and be provided directions to different areas around the globe. However, users often enjoy pushing the boundaries of software. Typing in a destination overseas, for example from Los Angeles, California to Tokyo, Japan, brings up directions that include the suggestion for the user to "take a jet ski across the Pacific Ocean" (Google maps). Variations exist, such as taking a kayak or rowboat across. Clearly, no user would likely use a jet ski, kayak, or rowboat to cross the Pacific Ocean (except for those trying to break a record), but it underscores the absurdity of the request, crossing an ocean by car, by presenting a solution that is equally absurd. Here, both incongruity and superiority theories can be applied. The incongruity comes from the surprise a user might feel by being presented with such a bizarre suggestion in the middle of an otherwise serious set of directions. However, it could also be argued that by creating such a ludicrous suggestion on how to cross a vast ocean, an attempt is made to make the user the butt of the joke, thus relying on superiority theory to produce humor. Using the four functions of humor, this style of humor is most likely associated with enforcement as well, as it seeks to draw attention to the fact that the request being made by the user is ridiculous.

Google has also included a dash of humor embedded within Google Help, the main source of technical documentation for all products and services related to Google. In isolated areas of Google Help, humor is injected into optional tabs, or takes the form of other media in

order to demonstrate a function that the user can further investigate without cluttering up the main help file. For example, under the "Delete your Blog" page, standard technical writing prose, with a list of short and easy to understand steps exist. However, at the bottom of the page there is an option to "learn more". Under "restore a deleted blog" a dropdown set of instructions appear. The help file uses an example to help illustrate how to restore a deleted blog.

> Let's say you have five blogs about food. After giving up sweets, you decide to delete your "Desserts" blog; but after a week, you realize that you're not quite ready for this level of sacrifice. Here's how to restore the deleted "Desserts" blog: ("Delete your Blog")

Though arguably mild in its humor, this example is most closely associated with the clarification function of humor. This clarification is accomplished by choosing a topic that most people can identify with, a love of sweets. The author then suggests what is probably unthinkable to many readers, to rid their lives completely of desserts. Many users would find this as hard to accomplish as the author suggests, so can relate to the author's need to restore a "desserts" blog. The cultural norm being played on here is that ridding one's life of sweets completely is a difficult task to accomplish and that many users might find impossible. Thus, the humor present in the passage plays on this cultural norm by understating what many users would be feeling after a week without sweets. The example serves not only to clarify how to perform a function, but does so by uniting the author and the user in common interest.

The popularity and versatility of video documentation has also crept into the technical writing world. YouTube, now owned by Google, has hundreds of thousands of help videos,

most of them made by users rather than developers of a product. Within Google Help, these

types of videos are also being used, though they are being developed by employees of Google

rather than users. For example, under "Basic Search Help," a link is provided to a video

explaining how to search for the definition on a word using Google entitled "Wishin' for a

Definition". The video is thirty-five seconds long and is set to a beat similar in construction to

rap. As the performer recites the lyrics of the initial part of the song, the lyrics are typed into a

Gmail window, giving the user the opportunity to keep up with what the singer is saying. It

then switches to showing the performer confused by the word "loquacious". At this point, the

screen flips to showing how to use Google to define the word, with the last line in the song

being "word," connecting both to finding the meaning of a new word and the stereotypical rap

use ("Basic Search Help"). The rap piece itself is performed in an understated, intentionally bad

way by a performer seeming to imitate the style of rap without understanding its nuances. This

leads one to initially suspect that, of the four functions of humor, the rhetor may have been

intending to use enforcement or differentiation as the means to suggest humor. On the

contrary, the rhetor is actually engaging in attempting to use identification. In the lyrics, he

uses the phrase "[w]ell if your vocabulary is as poor as mine" to enlist self-deprecating humor

to connect with the audience ("Basic Search Help"). In addition, the rhetor likely is well aware

of how rap should sound, and is equally aware that he is not properly representing high quality

rap music. Instead, he has incorporated an ethos of "geek" or "nerd" attempting to replicate

rap, and ultimately failing at the attempt. It is here where the majority of the humor lies,

where the social expectation of Google employees are perceived as "geeks" and "nerds" is

reinforced humorously by a nerds attempt at a rap song, and the audience is elevated beyond

the rhetor by feeling more knowledgeable about rap than the performer himself. The humor

would be most closely associated with superiority theory, as it places the audience in a superior

position to the rhetor. However, incongruity theory can also explain that this style of humor is

funny because it violates the social norm of a nerd rapping, while reinforcing the norm that a

nerd would rap badly.

It is important to note that while humor exists within the technical documentation of

Google, it is not widely used. Indeed, the use of humor in the Google Help pages is remarkably

sparse, despite the fact that Google itself has created an ethos where fun and humor are

important key components to their corporate vision. I will discuss the implications of Google's

choice to include a bare minimum of humor within the Google Help files later in Chapter 5.

However, it is important to note the different approaches used between the standard ethos

that Google creates with its Google Doodles, the farcical technical communication they produce

with their April Fool's jokes, and their actual technical documentation in Google Help. When

looking at the four functions of humor, there is greater emphasis on identification and

clarification within Google Help than there is in the April Fool's or Google Doodles.

CHAPTER 4: ETHOS "FOR DUMMIES"

When it comes to supplemental technical communication about a large span of subjects, few names are as well known or as far reaching as the *"For Dummies"* series. With over 250 million books in print worldwide and more than 1,800 titles, the *"For Dummies"* series has created success by creating a popular product and an ethos which places it outside the mainstream manual ("About *"For Dummies"*"). As one of the largest and most successful brands of secondary manuals on the market, *"For Dummies"* has helped to create the niche for secondary manuals and creates a style that is emulated by other secondary manuals.

The *"For Dummies"* gains a great deal of its success from its development of an ethos that advocates for the end user. While development teams of primary manuals continue to find new and innovative ways to try and connect with an audience, *"For Dummies"* has the opportunity to establish itself quickly with the audience by placing itself as an outside observer between the product company and the end user. The series works to assure its readers that "you can trust Dummies.com to tell it like it is, without all the technical jargon" ("About *"For Dummies"*"). Language that may be used but not defined in a primary manual may be excluded from or defined within a *"For Dummies"* book in more concise terms.

Not every *"For Dummies"* publication is widely successful. While some books and publications have helped millions of users, such as *DOS For Dummies,* and *Windows 95 For Dummies*, other books have been less successful. The *"For Dummies"* brand has developed its own level of situated ethos that allows individual authors to "get their foot in the door" when it comes to users. However, unlike a large cooperation, where that situated ethos must be rigidly adhered to, the *"For Dummies"* series relies on the author's own invented ethos to ensure a

successful product. Thus, the author's own contributions to ethos play a vital role in *"For

Dummies"'* success or failure.

Establishing Ethos from the Outside

Unlike many products made today that come with some form of documentation, the

"For Dummies" series doesn't have an attachment to the end product that it documents.

Instead, it fills the role of supplemental, or secondary, documentation not affiliated with the

product or concept being sold. Indeed, some documentation that the *"For Dummies"* series

writes isn't even related to a specific product at all, but rather a concept or idea that is not, by

itself, marketable. For example, there is *Statistics For Dummies* or *Bipolar Disorder For

Dummies*, one of which is a concept or way of organizing data that no one directly has a patent

on, and the other is a disease few people want to acquire (after all, it's not as if a company

would intentionally sell bipolar disorder in the hopes that their customers enjoy it as a product).

These types of manuals have become more popular with a large body of users ever since their

introduction.

> Despite the wishes that authors of primary documentation might have when
>
> designing their printed and online user assistance, the evidence is that a large
>
> percentage of buyers of popular software applications are also buying secondary
>
> manuals to replace or supplement the primary documentation they received
>
> with their software. (Coney and Chatfield, 26)

While manuals relating to non-marketable products do sell, and are common

throughout the supplementary documentation world, these manuals are not where the *"For

Dummies" series largely gains its success. Rather, their success comes from documentation

that adds to the primary documentation that came with the product.

The "For Dummies" series was founded after its creators felt a level of frustration with

the documentation available. The "For Dummies" series began in 1991 with the publication of

DOS "For Dummies," a manual aimed at helping users more easily navigate the DOS interface.

Their simple philosophy advocated that their books should,

> [r]elate to the anxiety and frustration that people feel about technology by
>
> poking fun at it with books that are insightful and educational and make difficult
>
> material interesting and easy. Add a strong dose of personality, a dash of comic
>
> relief with entertaining cartoons, and — voilá — you have a "For Dummies"
>
> book. ("The "For Dummies" Success Story")

In this way, the "For Dummies" series creates a situated ethos with its readers that

contrasts drastically from traditional forms of ethos used in most primary manuals. The series

actively seeks to enhance its own ethos by contrasting itself against the ethos of the primary

manual it is supplementing, rather than necessarily working in concert with it. The intended

situational ethos also seeks to represent a user-centered approach by empathizing and relating

to the user, especially in their frustrations with the technology they are working with. The

addition of "personality" and "comic relief" further differentiates the "For Dummies" intended

ethos from traditional manual styles, which often exclude a sense of personality, and use

humor only sparingly if at all.

The degree to which the "For Dummies" series tried to detach itself from a standard

ethos initially reduced the credibility of the series. The title "For Dummies" was not well

received, particularly by those who would be selling the books. In fact, "most bookstore chains

didn't want to carry the book at all, claiming that the title insulted their customers and readers

in general" ("The *"For Dummies"* Success Story"). The "For Dummies" phrase implies that the

user is less intelligent, thus potentially driving customers away. It is possible that the success of

the *"For Dummies"* series is not due to this rhetorical strategy, but rather in spite of it. The

usefulness and popularity of the product worked to overcome this initial disadvantage. Thus,

the use of the phrase "For Dummies" in the title created a profound impact on the ethos, and

demonstrates how ethos is created both by the author and by the reader. While the authors

felt the phrase was playful and fun, and would enhance their ethos by implying a commonality

with non-experts in the product, the readers (in this case the bookstores) saw the book as

insulting and demeaning to users. However, it is also possible that while this strategy hurt the

ethos of *"For Dummies"* initially, it served to bolster the company's ethos with its intended

audience: "[b]y positioning itself as a book "For Dummies," the book, in seeming to make fun

of users, is actually saying with humor that it is going to work hard to be nice to readers"

(Jeyaraj, 98). Established situated ethos and a strong product aided in an enhancement of

authority for the company, and assures the reader that the phrase itself is not intended as an

insult.

The situated ethos that developed around the *"For Dummies"* series has followed in the

footsteps of many other secondary manuals by creating an ethos that empathizes with and

supports the user. Secondary manuals are not necessarily as comprehensive as a primary

manual would be and "[a] primary manual could claim a higher degree of accuracy than could a

secondary manual" (Coney and Chatfield, 27). Indeed, few of the *"For Dummies"* books can or

even claim to deal with every small bit of minutiae of a program or product, nor do they

necessarily have an as extensive a list of troubleshooting options for the user to use. The series

also does not necessarily include information on how to contact customer support, or other

functions that a primary manual might better cover.

Yet while the secondary manual cannot claim to be comprehensive, it does gain ethos

by being detached from the developer of the product. While primary manuals seek to contain

all that needs to be known in order to properly use a product, they cannot cover other aspects

that a user may wish to know about: "one hurdle primary manuals face is the perception

among some users that a primary manual cannot fully disclose known problems with the

subject application as a secondary manual can (or even should)" (Coney and Chatfield, 27).

Thus, primary manuals wouldn't be able to stand on the witness stand and tell the truth, the

whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the product it represents. Indeed, the "For

Dummies" books often point out deficiencies in a product, or ways in which the user can get

around difficulties that they may encounter, through non-conventional means. This ability for

secondary manuals like "For Dummies" to situate themselves outside of the traditional primary

real allows them to approach ethos in different ways.

In many ways, "For Dummies" utilizes ordinary users as producers of their

documentation. In other words, rather than relying on product experts, they may enlist the

help of a user of the product who has become an expert with the product through other means.

"These user-producers engage in productive acts outside of and, indeed, in resistance to

institutional agendas" (Kimball, 71). This resistance to institutional agendas further allows

secondary documentation like the "For Dummies" series to "not so much [function as] an

arbitrator between reader and [the product], but an advocate for the reader" (Coney and

Chatfield, 28). The position of secondary manuals in the rhetorical discourse means that "[n]o

manual could claim to have the "inside story" to the extent that a primary manual could," and

few secondary manuals even work to capture the "inside story" (Coney and Chatfield, 27).

Instead, they concentrate on being an advocate for the reader, working hard to project a level

of trust with the reader.

While I have primarily discussed the use of situated ethos in relation to the *"For*

Dummies" series above, it is important to note that invented ethos is just as critical, if not more

so, to the success of the series. While *"For Dummies"* relies on its situated ethos to give

someone a general impression of what to expect from one of their products, the company does

provide a great deal of leeway in how an author may approach the topic. As a result, the

author must invent an ethos when writing a *"For Dummies"* book.

The author is very much at the forefront of a *"For Dummies"* publication. While many

primary manuals do not include the author of the manual in the publication, the author is

credited within a *"For Dummies"* publication. In fact, most *"For Dummies"* publications have a

section within the book describing some of the background of the author. This act closes the

distance between the user of the manual and the producer of the manual, allowing for a

stronger rhetorical connection and a greater chance that the author's rhetorical strategies will

affect the success of the publication. It also affects where the user might direct his or her ire

when something goes wrong. For example, "[w]hen a Word user comes to *The Microsoft Word*

User's Guide with a problem to solve, the user is in a sense dealing with Word, which was the

source of the problem to begin with" (Coney and Chatfield, 28). This can cause additional

frustration and cause the audience to convey a lack of ethos with the manual, as it seems to

have already to have betrayed his or her expectations to begin with. Because there is no

author easily visible in the primary manual, a user is forced to conclude that the product itself is

even more flawed if the manual is not laid out properly or does not easily solve the user's

problem. Thus, the "blame" for bad documentation is conveyed onto the company or product

itself, not the specific writer. On the other hand, the *"For Dummies"* series clearly places the

writer as an agent within the conversation, and a clear delineation exists between authors of

different *"For Dummies"* books.

The invented ethos that a writer may take on when writing a *"For Dummies"* book has

other benefits as well.   Among these benefits is an enhanced freedom to deviate from

normative styles. An author benefits from invented ethos because "invented ethos is more

playful since, as a product of language, it is concerned more with the artistic creation of

character" (Brahnam, 26). The *"For Dummies"* series is also more concerned with a creation of

character and personality within their documentation. Unlike traditional primary manuals, the

"For Dummies" books each have a different persona that is used by that particular author.

While the situated ethos of the *"For Dummies"* brand claims that each Dummies book "pokes

fun" at other manuals and that each carries with it "a dose of comic relief," these elements are

not necessarily present in each book. It is ultimately up to the author's invented persona to

decide whether they will include items such as humor in their particular book.

The Rhetorical Role of Humor *"For Dummies"*

A large part of the identity of the *"For Dummies"* series comes from humor. As

discussed in the previous section, humor is one element that the *"For Dummies"* series uses to

connect with their users. Establishing humor aids in creating the type of invented persona that

the author hopes will put the user at ease and establish a positive ethos. The three main

theories of humor, superiority; relief; and incongruity theories, can all be seen in certain styles

of humor reflected in the *"For Dummies"* series. In addition, the four functions of humor,

identification; clarification; differentiation; and enforcement, are also present and illuminate

the intent of the use of humor by the author.

One of the more successful and effective *"For Dummies"* books is *Build Your Own PC Do-*

It-Yourself For Dummies by Mark L. Chambers. The book is designed to help novice to

moderate computer users with the task of building their own system from the individual parts

available online or in computer stores. The author begins by going out of his way to assure the

user that this process is not as hard as it might otherwise seem.

> You've decided to build your own computer. Congratulations! That statement
>
> might seem a little like "You've decided to fly a 747" or "You've decided to teach
>
> yourself accounting"--but I'm here to tell you that this book was especially
>
> written to make it both easy and (believe it or not *fun*) to build your own
>
> multimedia computer with an Intel or AMD processor (Chambers, 1).

Chambers begins by inventing an ethos designed to connect with the audience. As the

reader, we don't really know if the first time he tried to put together a computer he felt as

overwhelmed at the prospect as he is claiming the user does now, but the ethos he invents for

himself creates the perception that he understands the user. He uses humor to connect with

the audience by empathizing with the user, suggesting that they feel the task is truly complex

and daunting. He then proceeds to reassure them that the process is not as hard as flying a 747

or as dull as accounting. Both relief theory and superiority theory are able to describe the

method of humor. Superiority is displayed by suggesting that all accountants are dull people,

and the absurdity of a non-pilot flying a 747 adds levity to provide relief that the subject matter

is not as hard as it seems. In intent, the author is clearly trying to connect with his audience,

and while some prideful accountants may find the phrasing potentially off-putting, for the

majority of users, Chambers is using the identification function to connect with his audience.

Chambers continues to attempt to connect with his audience by describing the

differences between learning how to construct a PC on your own versus buying a retail PC. The

author starts by suggesting that there is little one can learn beyond separating the computer

from Styrofoam when buying a computer from computer manufacturers, then proceeds to

describe the benefits of building your own PC.

> On the other hand, when you build your own computer, you *know* what makes it
>
> tick. You'll blossom into a bona fide techno-wizard! With your assembly
>
> experience and your knowledge of PC hardware, you'll be better prepared to fix
>
> problems and upgrade hardware and peripherals. The technicians at your local
>
> PC repair shop will wonder what happened to you; perhaps you should visit
>
> them from time to time just to swap hard drive specifications (Chambers, 2).

The humor in this passage is not only created from the concept of a novice finding the

idea of going into a computer store eventually armed with the knowledge to swap

specifications with the staff to be humorous, but is also enhanced by the persona taken by

Chambers. The phrase "bona fide techno-wizard!" is unlikely to be uttered in a primary

manual, and thus is an example of incongruity within the text, surprising and delighting a reader

with the ease of understanding the concept. It also further demonstrates the clarification

function of humor by clarifying and reinforcing the previous idea that to know what makes a

computer tick ultimately leads to techno-wizardry. Thus, the passage is an example of humor

not being used for its own sake, but rather to inform the reader and connect with them, as well

as put their fears to ease.

Chambers also uses humor that fits in well with superiority theory. The author contrasts

the user against a computer salesperson, creating a sales experience that is less than ideal.

> Though used-car salespeople seem to rank the lowest on the social totem pole,
>
> computer salespeople aren't much better. Many salespeople who I've
>
> encountered in retail computer stores either consider the customer an idiot or
>
> have little idea of exactly what they're selling (making them the perfect target
>
> for a few well-placed techno-questions--nothing's funnier than an embarrassed
>
> clueless salesperson who treated you like a computer novice just a few seconds
>
> before)! (Chambers, 3)

The author uses superiority theory to clearly place the user above computer

salespeople. He also takes the opportunity to rank used-car salespeople lower than even those

in the computer industry. The author is relying on the function of differentiation to produce

humor in the majority of his audience by connecting with users who have had poor experience

with salespeople. This function is divisive with the "out group" and thus does not seek to unify

that specific group with the rest of the audience, but rather use them as the butt of the joke.

Chambers' secondary manual is also careful to avoid some of the common pitfalls of

using humor in technical communication. Most of the humor used is being used for a purpose

other than to elicit mirth form the audience. His goal is often to connect with his audience, but

may also be to highlight a specific point or reduce user apprehension to the task at hand.

Another way Chambers avoids making costly mistakes is that he keeps the humor out of the

individual steps he describes in building the computer. While side information is presented

should the user wish further reading which does contain humorous elements, the actual steps

are devoid of humor. If the user does not wish to read the context of what they are doing, but

merely follow the appropriate steps, humor does not impede his or her task.

Other *"For Dummies"* books have not garnered as much success or popularity as

Chambers'. For example, *Switching to a Mac For Dummies* by Arnold Reinhold which guides a

user from using a PC computer, dominated by the Windows operating system, to a Macintosh

system, has had some negative reviews relating to the persona adopted by the author. The

author seeks to help the user by giving advice and action on what devices would be right for the

user, but also works hard to convince the user that the move from PC to Mac is the right choice.

Reinhold starts by listing the actions a Macintosh product can't do: "Apple Macintosh

computers aren't perfect. They can't cure bad breath, save your marriage, or fix a bad hair day"

(Reinhold, 9). The passage uses incongruity to imply that a Mac may not be perfect, but only in

the tasks for which it wasn't designed for. The humor lies both in the absurdity of the

comparison, and in the caricature of Mac users, who often laud the advantages Mac products.

Those readers who have experienced a devoted Mac user may find additional humor that a

novice may not understand.

A great deal of the humor used by Reinhold, however, stems from superiority theory.

The persona he creates is largely that of the very caricature that the user may chuckle at in the

first line. His ethos is that of an experienced Mac user who greatly prefers Apple products to

those of Microsoft.   Far from being an impartial observer, the author inserts himself into the

discussion, using his invented ethos to convince users that what they are gaining is better than

what they are giving up. In describing the process of giving up a PC for a Mac, he suggests that

many people find it hard to switch: "[w]hen you feel the shame of betrayal and the pangs of

guilt coming on, repeat this mantra: 'It's just a computer. It's just a computer. It's just a

computer'" (Reinhold, 19). This passage is an example of Reinhold using superiority to

showcase the difficulty in switching systems. However, inherent in the humor is the idea that

one feels shame when leaving their old system. Rather than supporting the user, the passage

talks down to the user, and places the author above the user with a condescending tone.

Reinhold continues in passages that demonstrate his preferences for Mac over PC. He

states that "[l]ife is too short for Windows aggravation" and compares PCs unfavorably to

Macintosh systems: "[n]o one has time to fuss over [computers], fix crashes, fight viruses, clean

out hard drives, figure out why the printer won't work, reload the software, or press

Ctrl+Alt+Delete. We need computers to be there when we want them" (Reinhold, 9).

Throughout the manual, Reinhold maintains this ethos. Again, superiority is largely at work in

his humor use and general ethos. The function of humor his ethos carries is that of

differentiation, pitting the PC, and its advocates, against the Mac and its users. This persona is

largely successful if the audience is a frustrated PC user who feels the Macintosh system will

provide him or her a better product. However, the humor and ethos used has the potential to

alienate the user as well. The author does not consider a user that may be forced to switch to a

Mac system but otherwise enjoys their PC. As a result, reviews of this book are mixed, with

comments suggesting a loss of ethos, such as "[t]his subject should be written by a pc user. I got

tired of the Mac proselytizing" (Ashley's Reviews). Such comments highlight what happens

when humor and persona are improperly applied. The author loses credibility not only because

he developed a persona that suggested superiority of one product over another, but also that

the author did not approach the problem from a PC user's perspective. The author was not

able to successfully identify with part of his audience because his intent was to differentiate the

two products.

As previously stated, the *"For Dummies"* series also produces documents that deal in

assisting users in topics that may not directly relate to a product. For example, there exists an

Algebra For Dummies, *Alzheimer's For Dummies*, and *Sex For Dummies*. While some products

may be advised or listed within these manuals, few of them focus on a specific product and

how it works. The same can be said of Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts' book, *Technical Writing For*

Dummies. While not specifically working with a device or product, *Technical Writing For*

Dummies also uses humor to inform and instruct within the technical writing genre. Much like

Chambers, Lindsell-Roberts starts her book trying to relate to and support the reader's fears

and frustrations with technical writing by splicing in a dash of humor. She lists several reasons a

reader might wish to read the book, saving the humor as the last bullet point in the list. "This

book is for you if.....You shake and grunt like an unbalanced clothes dryer when you're asked to

write a technical document" (Lindsell-Roberts, 11). Like Chambers' opening lines, the intent of

Lindsell-Roberts is to connect with her audience, so she uses identification styles of humor to

relate to her audience. The humor relies largely on the relieving of user tension, and unlike

Chambers, has no real superiority elements to it.

Lindsell-Roberts also relies heavily on the clarification function of humor, more so than the previous two examples. When describing concepts such as active and passive voice, she uses examples to help clarify her position, while still adding a dash of humor to reinforce the point and make it memorable.

> "I love you" is probably the most wonderful example of active voice. It's animated and alive! What if that same special someone leans over and whispers in your ear, "You are loved"? (By whom? The dog?) Or worse yet, what if your special someone says, "You are loved by me"? (at that point, you'd probably start checking the personal ads.) The last two attempts at passion are passive. They're dull, weak, and absolutely ineffective. (76)

The passage uses the example of love to clarify why passive voice is less ideal than active voice, and incorporates humor to further show why passive voice is weak or bizarre. The humor is largely relying on the incongruity of a lover's passiveness with one of the more powerful statements that can be made. The author demonstrates with humor that a lack of clarity in the passive statement can lead to an embarrassing situation for one's lover. She continues to use the clarification function of humor when describing dangling participles. "If your participles dangle, it's nothing to be ashamed of. The condition's curable" (Lindsell-Roberts, 213). In contrast to Reinhold, Lindsell-Roberts avoids using superiority theory in these passages, opting instead to use humor that again primarily relies on relieving tension with the focus on clarifying or identifying with her audience.

However, she still incorporates humor that aligns with superiority theory in some of her passages. She states, "[t]he United States is probably the only country in the universe that isn't

using the metric system" (Lindsell-Roberts, 220). Unlike many of the previous examples, she

incorporates a very mild form of enforcement, demonstrating that in most other societies

around the world, the metric system of measurement is preferred, thus the United States

violates a global social norm (or measurement norm). This is a form of delicate rebuke, but still

allows her to maintain credibility with the audience as it is both not a stinging rebuke, and most

readers recognize that conversion in the metric system is easier.

The author also uses humor that highlights the superiority of one group over another.

In the appendix of her book, she lists several technical jargon terms and defines them for the

user. She quickly defines the shorthand "24/7," but then proceeds to expand upon the

definition by noting that "[w]hen you call a 24/7 hotline, however, you may hear the following

message: "Your call is very important to us. Please stay on the line, and your call will be

answered as soon as we finish servicing all of North America'" (223). This passage, though

again mild, functions to differentiate help hotlines' intended purpose of helping users, with

their actual effect of often frustrating users with long delays. She exaggerates (just barely) the

amount of other callers that might be ahead of the user on the helpline to connect with

frustrated users. While the humor here serves as a humorous anecdote, and does help the

writer connect and sympathize with the audience, it does not serve any further purpose, and

may distract from the user's goals.

Lindsell-Roberts' *"For Dummies"* book includes humor from beginning to end. Unlike

Chambers, who separated areas of humor and direction tactically, Lindsell-Roberts uses humor

throughout her book. Her definition of 24/7 is a good example of this. The humor appears in

the appendix section of the manual, where most users would want a quick reference to look up

a specific term. Instead, the user is treated to a fairly long passage that detracts from the quick

and easy reference, and not only limits the amount of space for other terms she could have

included, but also defeats the purpose of a quick appendix reference.

Each *"For Dummies"* example illustrates the differences between authors. While the

"For Dummies" series maintains a situated ethos that advocates for personality and humor

within the manuals, there is not a consistent framework for an author to follow as there is in

Google's Help files. No two authors' style are completely alike in a *"For Dummies"* book.

Instead, the series must rely as much if not more on the author's invented ethos for its success,

and for defining what kind of persona the book, and thus the series, will use. Many books on

the *"For Dummies"* website advertise that humor is present when it may not be the case. For

example, *Elder Care For Dummies* lists "A dash of humor and fun" as one of the criteria present

in the book, as many books have listed, however very little humor is present ("For Dummies"

Store). This indicates that *"For Dummies"'* situated ethos continues to advocate for humor and

fun, but the author's invented ethos may guide a manual to forgo using humor. Regardless,

humor use in the *"For Dummies"* series varies, borrowing from all functions and theories of

humor.

CHAPTER 5: ON ETHOS AND HUMOR

Cultural Considerations

Despite the considerable success of the *"For Dummies"* series and the steps taken by Google to incorporate humor into their ethos, the use of humor is largely either underrepresented or still considered by many to be unwise. This is not surprising. Despite Google's use of humor in the company's help pages, as well as the company's April Fools pages or Doodles, and *"For Dummies'"* widespread success, many of these items are made for an English speaking, or United States market. Still, within the intended audience, these two companies have created great success, and lessons can be learned from their approaches to humor.

Both Google and the *"For Dummies"* series cater to a large audience. It is an audience that is highly diverse, with many different ethnicities and cultures mingled together. This highly diverse cultural framework brings with it a complex challenge to write for such a broad audience. Google in particular not only writes for American and English speaking audiences, but deals in cultures around the world. Their messages must be culturally situated in order to maintain their credibility with the users they serve. Ethos can be negatively affected by humor in a complex cultural situation because not all parties may understand or even approve of humor within their technical communication. In the case of understanding humor, without understanding the cultural framework to which humor functions in a specific culture, a user might not understand the joke.

Individuals must have rationally come to understand normal patterns of reality before they can notice differences. Comprehending these situations and their

implications is required before humor, or a cognitive state of mirth, can be

experienced. (Meyer, 313)

In other words, if the user is not native to the culture where the humor is being

produced, they must first understand the cultural patterns around them before humor can

occur. Google's rap video showing how to search for the definition of a word is a good

example. While users from other cultures may have heard of rap music, they may not be able

to discern proper rap music from poor rap music. As a result, the video fails to produce humor,

and may ultimately turn off a viewer unfamiliar with the joke.

Of course, the easiest way to ensure that ethos does not suffer due to a cultural conflict

from humor is to avoid using humor. However, there are other steps technical communicators

can use to not only allow for the inclusion of humor where appropriate, but also further

enhance the ethos of their document. One way to safely include humor is to ensure that

international technical writing teams have bicultural team members, or individuals fluent not

only in the language of another culture, but also social norms of that culture, who can advise

the team on cultural norms: "I believe that if bicultural communicators work with international

technical writing teams, they can begin improving usability by not only avoiding obvious sins of

cultural commission but also proactively avoiding even sins of cultural omission" (Jeyaraj, 99).

If a culture is open to the possibility of humor placed within a technical document and that

humor may enhance the document's credibility, then bicultural team members can point out

these omissions and presumably enhance the document. After all, "[c]ultural situatedness is

necessary if technical documentation is to score high on usability" (Jeyaraj, 99).

This has been shown to be the case with the *"For Dummies"* series. The company has shown itself to be sensitive to the cultural environment in which it operates.

> This series produced in North America takes full advantage of various cultural features familiar to United States audiences and produces narratives that, in being proactive in its attempts to culturally situate documentation, help audiences deal with different applications and topics. Because of its proactive approach, this instructional material not only avoids sins of commission, but also sins of cultural omission (Jeyaraj, 98).

In other words, the *"For Dummies"* series situates itself in the cultural framework that allows it to succeed. The series not only attempts to avoid costly pitfalls to ethos, but enhances ethos by adopting personas that include humor and personality. This level of informality is still somewhat rare in most primary manuals, but within the secondary manual realm, it is often used to great effect. While it is true that most *"For Dummies"* manuals are North American products, designed by those aware of proper cultural memes, it nevertheless showcases the value of a culturally situated manual.

> Most international technical communicators would say that the humorous fictitious reasons the narrative offers for why Word cannot undo the action is just redundant and should not be in the text. But the text, in allowing such redundancies for the sake of including local humor, communicates to the reader that it understands the users' frustration when poor product design prevents users from undoing something. In doing so, it also exhibits another American cultural trait: it is okay to be vulnerable and acknowledge design problems in the

product if there are any. By doing so, for users the instructions are not only understandable and enjoyable but also trustworthy (Jeyaraj, 99).

Clearly not all technical writing projects will have access to bicultural resources, or may be operating within a culture where ethos would suffer by using any style of humor. In these cases, the choice to include humor in the text should be cautiously approached, or not considered at all. However, when the resources are available, or a major component of the document relies on an international audience, culturally situating the text can provide new avenues to increase the manual's ethos. In other words, humor can be used in international documentation provided humor in technical documentation is an acceptable practice within that culture and the writing team has a high level of situated cultural knowledge.

Using Humor Tactically (Or Tactfully)

The choice and method of using humor in technical documentation still requires deep consideration. While the benefits of successful humor uses can enhance ethos both for the document itself as well as for the company that produces it, humor also runs the risk of reducing credibility with the audience or hindering reading. There does not exist a comprehensive guide for technical writers to turn to when considering the use of humor, but some conclusions can be drawn from the examples of Google and *"For Dummies".*

- <u>Know your Audience</u>: In the case of Google and *"For Dummies,"* both companies serve a large and diverse audience. *"For Dummies"* goes out of its way to culturally situate manuals made for North American, English-speaking audiences, and thus creates ethos by connecting user and producer together. However, as *"For Dummies"* is a secondary manual and not affiliated with a product, and requires purchase, the *"For Dummies"*

audience has the choice to purchase the humorous manual. Google, on the other hand,

serves a worldwide audience, and no purchase is necessary to use many of its products.

- Know Your Product: What kind of manual is the writer writing, and is the manual being

  produced a primary or secondary source? Secondary manuals have to potential for

  more freedom and greater use of invented ethos, which can increase or decrease

  credibility with the author. However, changes in situated ethos are likely to impact the

  company as a whole, especially if no author is identified in the documentation. It is

  important to note that even though *"For Dummies"* offers a situated ethos that

  promotes personality and humor in the company's technical documentation, not all of

  its documentation contains humor or personality. *Alzheimer's For Dummies* and *Breast*

  Cancer For Dummies are examples where humor is absent. The product, in these cases,

  is the compassionate advice given by the writer to the user without any form of levity.

  For example, the tone of *Alzheimer's For Dummies* concentrates more on compassion

  and empathy than levity:

  > It's a thorough and impartial thief that steals away the landmarks of your most
  >
  > cherished relationships and leaves you lost. It takes mothers, fathers, husbands,
  >
  > wives, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and beloved friends and
  >
  > turns them into strangers. And it does so ever so slowly, by agonizing inches and
  >
  > degrees. (Smith, Kenan, Kunik, and Gibbons)

  Here, the invented ethos stresses compassion over humor, however still includes a dose

  of personality. The authors in this case understand that humor may be more

  detrimental to families suffering through a debilitating disease.

- Success Breeds Success: Whether using invented or situated ethos, successful humor

  must be employed in order for further attempts to be successful. "[E]thos cannot be

  established through a single act. A reputation is built over time with consistent

  behavior. Those who seek to establish a comic ethos must do so by being consistently

  successful with humor over a period of time" (Zolten, 19). We see this even in a single

  manual relying on the invented ethos of the author. In *Switching to a Mac For Dummies*

  the writer's effectiveness with his humor was mixed when using humor that could

  potentially divide his intended audience. Those who found his use of humor off-putting

  or ineffective were more likely to become further agitated as more of the same function

  of humor was used. Thus careful consideration of the type of humor used should be

  considered and, if possible, usability testing should be conducted to ensure a positive

  ethos is being maintained.

- Don't Make Users Ill with Ill Humor: With few exceptions, negative or ill humor reduces

  the credibility of the rhetor within technical documentation. "For example, humor that

  is hard to understand or insulting should not be used, as it will likely have negative

  effects. In addition, it seems best to avoid sexual, ethnic, or racial humor" (Morkes,

  Kernal, and Nass, 423). Excessive or aggressive application of the differentiation or

  enforcement functions of humor can lead to ill or negative humor.

- Laughing to Excess: It is important when using humor in technical documentation not to

  overuse the strategy to connect with the audience. "Joking too often or during times

  that require seriousness can waste a user's time or frustrate a user" (Morkes, Kernal,

  and Nass, 425). Each line in Google's April Fools technical documentation was intended

to illicit a humorous response. Though appropriate for the rhetorical context they were in, this amount of humor would not have been appropriate in actual documentation.

Variety is the Spice of Life: Technical writers should be careful to vary their style of humor within the confines of the rhetorical situation so as not to bore the user with one specific style. "The same jokes should not be used too often. Over repeated exposures, humor tends to lose its appeal. This is consistent with the idea that the surprise element present in successful humor tends to decay after the first exposure" (Morkes, Kernal, and Nass, 424). This can apply not only to the types of humor used, but also which function the writer chooses to use. In *Switching to a Mac For Dummies*, the author relied heavily on humor derived from Superiority Theory, and often engaged exclusively in using it to differentiate Macs and PCs. As a result, the humor (as well as the ethos itself) became repetitive. In contrast, *Technical Writing For Dummies* used all four functions of humor within her documentation, and allowed the author to incorporate more humor into the document as a result.

- Know Where to Place Humor: Humor should be used tactically, placing humor where it can do the most good and, perhaps more importantly, not placing it where it can hinder understanding and action by the user. When using humor in computer applications, for example:

  "It is an open question whether humor would be appropriate for error messages and warnings, particularly because there is negative valence associated with these events. It is also not clear whether humor would be appropriate for

wizards or menus, which generally involve limited interactions" (Morkes, Kernal, and Nass, 425).

The tactical use of humor used in *Build Your Own PC Do-It-Yourself For Dummies* was a good example of avoiding humor in serious areas of the book. Humor was used in the beginning and ending sections, as well as areas that did not contain steps for the user to perform. This allowed the user to read the steps quickly and easily without being distracted by humor, but still gain the benefit of humor by reading the entire document.

- Laugh With Purpose: Technical writers must be cautious of using humor without understanding why they are using humor. "[H]umor should never be aimless; it should serve a specific purpose, even if it's used spontaneously" (Flowers, 11). It is tempting for writers to throw humor in spontaneously, hoping to increase credibility with the reader, but humor alone may not increase ethos. The four functions of humor provide a framework for the technical writer to consider when choosing to inject levity into a document. Is the writer seeking to unite his audience or divide them? If they are seeking to divide them, who are they dividing, and how much separation does the writer want between the readers he wishes to divide and those he wishes to unite? In *Build Your Own PC Do-It-Yourself For Dummies*, the author chooses to divide his audience between those who are relatively inexperienced with computers, and the retail employees that sell these computers. He uses differentiation to enhance his ethos with inexperienced computer builders. This decision makes sense in the context of his

rhetorical intentions, as he has invented an ethos that suggests he is more trusted than

the retail stores attempting to sell a computer.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Today, the importance of ethos in any form of communication remains a critical component of that communication. Society continues to become more focused on faster, more efficient forms of information delivery, as well as a widening of options on where that information comes from. Technical information can come from a variety of sources in today's society; not just from the tomes of knowledge passed down from the makers of technology, but also from those peering in from the outside looking to create secondary documentation, or from the users using the technology. Each of these choices occupies a different rhetorical position, and also situates themselves differently in regards to ethos. While the technological and societal changes have changed the way humanity creates, distributes, and receives information, the importance of establishing a robust sense of credibility with the audience remains as important, if not more complex, than it did in Aristotle's day. Good character cannot necessarily be formed by knowledge of the individual within the community as it could be done in Aristotle's time. While companies can maintain a high situated ethos by doing good works, or a noted author can maintain credibility after many years of successful publications, such an ethos is becoming rarer as the online environment prevails and allows people to construct a persona suitable to the communication at hand.

Humor can be a major contributor to how ethos is created in a communication. Humor helps to cement and solidify an invented or situated ethos, reinforcing a style of persona that the writer constructs. It provides social lubricant to help develop trust and close distance between the writer and the audience, provided the humor is positive and compliments rather than detracts the goals of the rhetorical situation. While the use of humor as a rhetorical

strategy has long been suspect or completely denied as beneficial to serious technical writing, current technical communication proves that this style of writing can make a positive contribution rhetorically. The choice to use humor rather than keep it separate from the conversation has been made, to some degree or another, in nearly every field, and has been used in serious documentation. So too has humor made its way into technical documentation and arguably continues to grow as the technical writing field continues to expand.

Ethos, humor, and how they relate to each other remains a complex topic. While Chapter 5 listed several recommended practices for technical writers when considering using humor, many of these suggestions remain somewhat vague and poorly understood. The three theories of humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity and the four functions of humor: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation provide a workable theoretical framework from which a technical writer can operate. A writer can use the three theories of humor and four functions to deeply consider the intent behind the humor they may choose to use and apply these concepts to that intent. However, greater research in this area should be conducted.

One of the key issues when it comes to humor and how it relates to ethos is the complexity and variety of humor that can be used in a document. "Rhetoricians from ancient to contemporary routinely discuss the link between humor and ethos" (Zolten, 7). Despite centuries devoted to the topic by rhetoricians and humor theorists, humor is still poorly understood, at least in the context of effectiveness with a given audience. Many variables exist in which an aspiring technical writer has to account. Effective placement of humor, persona,

the subject matter being written, and the various types of humor that a technical writer can employ are all key factors just from the writer's perspective. However, as ethos is not simply created by the writer or by the reader alone but rather shared between them, the writer must also consider his readers, how they will approach the document, what sort of expectations they may have, and what rhetorical position they are most likely to take when reading the documentation. The writer must ask "[i]s this the optimal distance for persuasion, or should it be closed or opened up," and humor is one of the strategies that allows distance to be closed with the reader (Crowley and Hawhee, 135). These complex variables make it difficult to formulate a singular cohesive strategy for the use of humor that would bolster ethos, as with each change in variable comes a change in the way the writer needs to think rhetorically. A how-to manual on constructing a table in a business environment versus home use can be approached from different rhetorical perspectives, and while neither setting requires or prevents the use of humor, it is more likely that conventional thinking would suggest that using humor in the manual for a business would be less rhetorically sound.

Yet, the effect humor has on other disciplines, detailed in the literature review, demonstrates that humor is not bound to the comedic sphere alone. Education, business, medicine, computer sciences, and a host of other fields utilize humor in a variety of ways, from increasing worker productivity and stimulating interest, to enhancing credibility and uniting individuals. Many serious fields discussing serious subjects incorporate humor into some of their discourse as a rhetorical strategy in the hopes of enhancing ethos. In the past, technical writers were advised to avoid humor and avoid developing personas which might close the distance between writer and reader. Today, we understand that persona and voice are

contingent on the rhetorical situation. Despite this dynamic view an almost nervous caution still exists within technical documentation literature suggesting that humor should be used sparingly, if used at all. This caution is a legitimate one, for, as discussed, there are dangers to using humor that might diminish the ethos of a document (and possibly the product and the company that produces it). But there is another legitimate reason to approach humor cautiously in technical communication; there exists no solid theoretical framework for a student of technical writing to turn to when considering using humor.

Yet, there exists a strong foundation from which to start formulating a working understanding of how humor interacts and influences ethos.   Borrowing from both psychology and humor studies, we observe that many of the theories being used in these fields can be applied to technical communication. Superiority, relief, and incongruity theories provide a method of understanding how humor is effective within a communication, and provides a technical writer with a framework to understand the type of humor they may choose to use. Mayer's four functions of humor, identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation, also offer a promising starting point for allowing technical communicators the opportunity to examine their intent behind using humor. Often in technical writing teaching tools, humor is described as something to be done with caution, but little understanding is imparted as to why this is so, or what a technical writer should do in order to determine whether humor is appropriate or not.

Mayer's four functions of humor allow the technical writer to think rhetorically about their choice to use humor and decide if it is appropriate for the situation. For example, a writer

may consider using humor in documentation, but have no clear reason for doing so. Considering the four functions of humor, the writer may decide that humor would not be appropriate. The writer doesn't want to risk alienating the audience, so chooses to avoid enforcement or differentiation, and realizes the need to maintain rhetorical distance from the audience, thus dropping identification. On the other hand, the writer may also decide that a particularly important point needs to be emphasized, and a dash of humor at the right moment might be required, and so relies on the clarification function to guide her to use the humor properly. In addition, it also provides a framework from which a technical writer can guide his or her efforts. These theories demonstrate that enforcement and differentiation carry with them a greater risk of producing "ill" or "negative" humor than do identification and clarification. Knowing this, a technical writer can either steer clear of those types of humor, or apply additional caution before using them.

Technical communication theory could benefit from a framework that studies the use and acceptability of humor more closely. More often today, technical communication continues to expand and is becoming ever more diverse. The *"For Dummies"* series, as well as other manuals before it like *How to keep your Volkswagen Alive*, have gained a level of success that have spurred other companies to begin using humor in their documentation. Google, while not yet fully embracing the concept in their help files, nevertheless promotes a fun and sometimes humorous persona, and additionally does include some humor within their help files, often using it to clarify or identify with their audience. Online documentation, especially documentation developed by third parties, continues to develop invented ethos that rely on personas which empathize and connect with an audience. A trend continues to develop where

both primary and secondary documentation are being supplemented by a simple Internet

search. Documentation is expanding further into message boards and online secondary help

files, where the end user is the producer of such knowledge. These message boards have a

distinct advantage to other forms of documentation in that they are free, easily available, and

can score even higher in credibility than either a primary or secondary manual due to their

highly public nature and the ability for many users to contribute ideas to solving a problem.

This allows users to become true producers of technical knowledge. In these message board

arenas, users often adopt a humorous or fun persona that helps (or hinders) the individual

poster's effectiveness. More and more, we see humor creeping into technical communication,

both through primary and secondary documentation, as well as through user developed

documentation.

While Mayer provides a good starting point for technical writers to examine their

practices and how they use humor in technical documentation, his four functions of humor

does little more than scratch the surface of humor and its relation to ethos. As humor is a

complex structure with many facets, the four functions of humor merely open the door for the

aspiring technical writer to understanding the function and consequences of using humor.

Mayer's four functions of humor do not go as in-depth as they may need to in order to explain

the function of humor fully. For example, in many cases, differentiation or enforcement can be

used to produce humor that is offensive or divisive and in general practice one might consider

avoiding it. However, one can successfully use differentiation to further enhance one's

credibility, as in the case of Chambers' use of it in his *"For Dummies"* manual. In the case of

Lindsell-Roberts, she used very mild forms of enforcement and differentiation to make her

point, while minimizing the offensive nature of the humor she used. Clearly, the latter two forms can be used successfully provided that care is taken. However, a further examination of all four functions of humor could provide a more robust and clear framework within each function as to the level of connection and involvement a joke can, and should have within a rhetorical context.

Further research should be conducted examining the relationship between humor and ethos, and with humor in general in technical communication. Little theoretical framework exists for technical communicators to draw from on humor that corresponds with the unique challenges facing technical communicators today. A robust framework for considering when and how humor should be approached in technical communication needs to be developed and taught. An examination of where humor might be appropriate in other cultures is also an area of research that desperately needs exploring. What cultures would, or have been open to humor use in technical documentation and what cultures would reject humor use? What is the function of humor in alternative cultures? Does humor use impact ethos, and if so, how? How can we, as technical communicators, use humor to more culturally situate our documentation, both within the North American sphere and beyond? These questions are not only important in understanding and producing proper documentation for other cultures, but also understanding how our documentation should function in our own culture as it becomes more diverse.

While technical communication will continue to place importance on ethos, it is important to consider humor as another tool with which ethos can be enhanced. One of the most important lessons from this thesis is the conclusion that we only begin to understand

what we do not understand about humor, and how it can enhance or detract from a rhetor's credibility, especially in technical communication. Understanding these effects, and developing a robust theory to guide students and technical writers in understanding both humor's role and effects should be a priority for further research.

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