



Pandemic University Replays

Writing Topical Satire...Fast! with Caitlin Kunkel

Caitlin is available for one-on-one virtual consultations and has a book for sale in our Campus Shop, courtesy of Glass Bookshop.

Book: [New Erotica for Feminists: Satirical Fantasies of Love, Lust, and Equal Pay](#)

T: [@Kunkeltron](#)

W: [caitlinkunkel.com](#)

N: [Satire Newsletter](#) (sent randomly for maximum anticipation)

TIP-SHEET

What is topical satire?

- Topical satire is a form of comedy that responds to a specific story that has been in the news in the last 24-48 hours.
- Coronavirus in general? Not topical. The day the US hits 1 million cases a day and Trump claims the virus is totally gone? Topical, baby!!
- Topical pieces typically have to be written in a very compressed time period.
 - Best case scenario - news breaks Friday at 5pm. You have till Monday morning!
 - Worse case - news breaks Monday at 9am. You have till mid-afternoon, MAYBE the next morning. Then, it's out of the cycle or someone else has tackled it.
- So how do you write topical satire?

- You take the SPECIFICS OF A NEWS STORY, combine them with a STRUCTURED FORMAT, then heighten OUT OF REALITY when writing.

Key Terms:

- Satire – the comedy of outrage. You are using humor and wit to CRITICIZE a person or institution. There is a target you are going after.
- Target – who are you CRITICIZING? Which person or institution above you?
- Point of View – at its simplest form, what the author is SAYING about a topic or target at the end of a piece. Are they asking you to take an action of any sort?
- Comedic Premise – what is unusual about the idea, what takes it out of reality?

Things to look for // pull out as you read and study pieces:

- The author's point of view
- The character's point of view (if applicable)
- The comedic premise of the piece (what makes it unique, exaggerated)
- The target of the piece (who/what is being criticized)
- The form of the piece (List? Quotes? Anecdotes? Recipe? Speech?)

Techniques for fast brainstorming // drafting // editing

- Clustering – a word cloud that helps explore patterns, thoughts, etc.
- Titles – they should be clear and contain the comedic premise AND -
- Form – is every rep a question? A recipe step? A diary entry? A monologue?
- Outside Reader – try to have one!
- Writing and Self-Editing on a tight deadline – are all jokes on the spine of the comedic premise? Does every graph end on a hard joke? Can you cut out extra words?

A repeatable process you can repeat (times just suggested):

- Read the news — find a topic/story you want to tackle (~15 min)
- Free write on the story to find a strong emotional connection // explore POV (~10 min)
- Read 2-3 other stories on the same topic for additional details // facts (~15 min)
- Cluster the story for strong images // ideas // associations - by hand if possible! (~5 min)
- Form a clear POV — what you FEEL or BELIEVE about the target (~2 min)
- Brainstorm a form to structure the piece — look back at cluster for clues (~10 min)
- Create titles that contain the comedic premise (unusual element) and form (~10 min)
- Pick a few titles, write a bit, go with the premise that feels more natural (~15 min)
- Finish the draft! Structure with the form, fill in jokes, heighten out of reality (~45 min)
- Create mental space, get outside eyes on it, step away (~1-2 hours)
- Rewrite, cutting anything that isn't needed, ending on strong jokes, use color coding (~30 min)
- Submit! Follow guidelines (~20 min)

Examples referenced:

- [“Leaving the Trump White House Mad Libs,”](#) Broti Gupta, *The New Yorker*
- [“It’s Extremely Divisive of You to Tell the Truth,”](#) Chas Gillespie, *McSweeney’s*
- [“As a 28-Year-Old Latino, I’m Shocked My New Novel, *Memoirs of a Middle-Aged White Lady*, Has Been so Poorly Received,”](#) Carlos Greaves, *McSweeney’s*
- [“Facebook Announces Plan to Break Up U.S. Government Before it Becomes Too Powerful,”](#) *The Onion*
- [“White Woman Was Hoping to Support a Black-owned Business in a Better Neighborhood,”](#) *Reductress*

- [“Section 8F of Donald and Melania Trump’s Prenuptial Agreement: Handholding,”](#) Caitlin Kunkel, *McSweeney’s*

JUST SOME sites with frequent topical satire:

- *McSweeney’s* (topical satire getting HUGE hits for them, open to subs from anyone, different topical email)
- *Shouts & Murmurs/Daily Shouts* (humor, will hit big topical stuff a few days later, topical typically only works if you’ve published there before and can sub directly to the editor)
- *The Onion* (satirical news; their “commentary” section has character POV satire, staff writers and some freelancers handle this)
- *Clickhole* (if you like your satire and humor absurd, staff-owned and written)
- *The Hard Times* (satirical punk news) and *The Hard Drive* (gaming, tech satirical news) - both these sites use contributors, check for how to become one.
- *Awf Magazine* (LGBTQ+ satirical news website, uses contributors, check their site)
- *Reductress* (satire parodying women’s media, uses contributors, check their site)
- *The Belladonna* (satire and comedy by women and marginalized genders, anyone can submit topical pieces, check site for guidelines)
- *Omnarchy* (dystopian satire, very topical these days, uses contributors in Chicago)
- *FLEXX* (“The most urban website in the world”, uses contributors, check site)
- *The Broadway Beat* (musical theater satire, delightful! Check site for contributor rules)
- *Weekly Humorist* (overall comedy and satire, open submissions, check site)

Tips to improve:

- If something big goes down in the news, check across a variety of sites to see the different angles that writers took on it.
- Color-code looking for the heightening of the comedic premise.
- Google your title! When you're working fast, you want to make sure something in the same vein isn't already out there.
- Use adrenaline! Try to brainstorm and get that first draft out all in one go.
- Be ruthless – if it's not working, abandon it and try another premise.
- Be honest – if you aren't able to get it right and you're out of time, don't submit it.

Topical satire columnists // performers

- Sarah Cooper (Twitter: [@sarahcpr](#))
- Alexandra Petri ([The Washington Post](#))
- R. Eric Thomas (*Elle*, "[Eric Reads the News](#)")

Additional resources:

- [The Satire and Humor Festival](#) (check out the Resources page)
- [My newsletter!](#)

–Caitlin

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