

“A Modest Proposal” Satire Writing Assignment

Write a satire: a literary work that ridicules a subject--an institution, person, trend, practice, idea, etc.--by presenting that subject with ironic humor calculated to expose various absurdities (follies, abuses, stupidities) associated with the subject. Horatian satire (named after the Roman poet, Horace) is gentle and somewhat sympathetic toward its subject; Juvenalian satire (from the Roman poet, Juvenal) is bitter and blasts away at human corruption with scathing moral indignation.

1. Choose an issue, political/popular figure, or group in your world that bothers you in some way. Consider current trends or views regarding poverty, politics, commercialism, professional sports, obesity, war, global warming, education, celebrities, technology, etc., what is going wrong, why, and what you would like to see done about these problems. You may consider writing a general thesis about how you really feel regarding the issue and how the issue might be resolved.
2. After you've selected your issue, next consider how you will approach the issue satirically. You may do so in the form of an essay or as a short story. Either way, this will take some creativity on your part. Remember that satire is never straightforward; it is ironic. So you will often find yourself discussing or endorsing the exact opposite of what you believe.
3. By the end of your satire, it should be clear that you actually disagree with the current state of the issue about which you are writing and that you are presenting a way that the audience can resolve the problem.

Guidelines and Expectations:

1. **Humor:** satire without humor is mere criticism.
2. **Attack:** satire without attack is mere comedy.
3. **Suitability:** satire of an undeserving object is cruel or just plain stupid. Further, suitability also applies to the form you choose: think outside of the box of the five-paragraph essay, and consider other forms that might better serve your satire.
4. **Clarity:** satire that does not clearly present its argument is not effective.
5. **Efficacy:** satire that does not change or unnerve an audience does not succeed as a satire. An effective satire convinces the audience by using ample and detailed evidence that something needs to change, either back to the way it was or in a completely different direction (conservative or revolutionary).
6. **Rhetorical Strategies:** satire employs a variety of tactics, namely, irony (verbal/sarcasm, situational, etc.), hyperbole, understatement, stupid or naive characters, ridiculous situations and outcomes, oversimplifications of complex issues or people, the juxtaposition of trivialities and tragedies. Again, the definition of irony is that the truth is the exact opposite of what seems to be the case, so you should very rarely, if ever, directly state what you're really trying to communicate. If you do choose to sneak in a literal and candid message, do so with subtlety.

1. Make sure you use irony--language that means the mocking opposite of what it says. Thus, you will be using indirection so that instead of directly attacking your subject, you will expose its weaknesses in an amusingly indirect manner.

2. Beware of direct sarcastic attack. Sarcastic name-calling loses the sense of control that the satirist strives for. (Example of indirect attack: "Sir, I am sitting in the smallest room in my house, with your letter in front of me. Soon, it will be behind me." The satiric

effect here is also gained by the sly use of a pun; satirists thrive on words with such double meanings.) Therefore, AVOID SARCASM--the blatant contradiction of one statement by another: "I like your letter so much, I think I'll use it as toilet paper!" "This food is so delicious, I only vomited 5 times when eating it!"

3. Give your reader some clues as to your true feelings. Since you will sometimes be writing the opposite of what you mean, you'll need to use language in such a way that the reader is not likely to misinterpret what you say and take it at face value.
4. No matter how far-fetched, your satire should imply a serious purpose--a main point.
5. Above all, make sure you create an imaginative situation, a "mode," to expose the target of your ridicule. For example, make up an awards ceremony, a 900-number, a test, a disease, a sport, a new product, a new law, a theme park, etc. as the satiric vehicle for your ridicule. If you are comically clever enough to create such a mode, your satire is likely to be more amusing than a satire that more directly attacks its target.

More Suggestions for satiric strategies:

1. Overpraise your subject so that you reveal by implication those features in it that you dislike.
2. For a serious problem, offer a "solution" that is designed, not really to convince the reader of your solution, but to expose something about the problem.
3. Follow the plot details of a well-known story (fairy tale, film, novel) as you tell another story. Select your well-known story so that you can make a number of effective parallels between that work and your subject.
4. Create a fictitious persona (a fictional first-person narrator, an "I") who expresses a view that is inherently unconvincing, yet it serves to expose some serious issue and imply a more adequate set of values than those under attack. An extension of this strategy would be to create a dialogue between two characters, one of whom serves as the "straight man" for the other.
5. Take a news incident or trend and satirize it by placing some of its features and characteristics in another context which reveals the original features in an outlandish way. See [The Onion](#) (check its archives) for lots of articles that have some satiric connection with news events. (<http://www.theonion.com/index.php?pre=1>)
6. Overturn a subject by presenting it from a viewpoint which is the direct opposite of an attitude that we normally associate with the subject.

Here are some examples of essays modeled on "A Modest Proposal":

Obesity:

<http://www.american.com/archive/2007/august-0807/taxing-obesity-a-modest-proposal>

Health care:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-krinsky/a-modest-proposal-to-elim_b_488826.html