

Proposal

Earlier this year, Bennett and Turner (2002) presented a series of studies which used humorous foils on introductory psychology exams in an effort to improve students' test performance and increase both learning and subject interest. After two-and-a-half years of unsuccessfully manipulating humor to find a test performance increase, it began to appear that studies finding humorous multiple choice foils can improve test scores were actually reporting Type I error. However, before concluding that humorous "e" responses have no effect, at least two issues required further investigation.

First, the lack of an effect of humorous foils might be because participants were simply not reading the humor. Obviously, for humor to have an effect, students must read it. To assess whether they are reading the humor, we began to insert probes into the test that request that the students, for example, draw a circle around their name on the answer sheet.

Second, we began to think that others who had found an effect for humor might have been inadvertently tipping-off the correct answer. To assess whether humorous foils might inadvertently provide information about which alternative is correct, we developed two "e" responses for each question: one that tips-off the answer (answer-based foil) and one that does not (question-based foil). Until now, our humorous alternatives have played off of the question, and provide no information about what the correct alternative is.

In our first test of these effects, results indicated no effect for either question-based or answer-based humor, regardless of whether students responded to the probe. However, this was the third test of the semester, and the two previous exams had only question-based humor. It might have been the case that these students were conditioned NOT to look to the "e" foil for help with the correct answer. Further, fewer students responded to the probe than read the humorous foils (at least based on casual conversations with students).

To address these issues, the first exam of this semester contained 16 question-based foils and 16 answer-based foils presented sequentially. Further, each set of questions was followed by its own probe. Further, two groups were created so that one group's answer-based items were the other group's question-based items and vice versa. Thus, while every student received the answer-based questions first, the difficulty level of any specific question would not influence the outcome.

Results clearly indicated that, while humor-readers did not differ from non-readers on the question-based items (in terms of the percent items correct), there was a dramatic difference between readers and non-readers on the answer-based items. Item analyses are also revealing. While this is only correlational evidence that reading answer-based humor has an effect, we plan to follow up this study in February by attempting to manipulate reading experimentally and present those data as well. In sum, while previous researchers have shown that humorous foils improve student performance, we have been hard-pressed to find such an effect after three years of trying. The only time we have found humorous foils to improve performance on introductory psychology exams is when the foils give away the answer, and then only when students read the foils.