

SAMPLE PAPER FOR WORKSHOP EXERCISE #2: CONCLUSIONS

The relief theory attempts to explain the function of humor as a psychological process, however it does not demonstrate a consistent explanation of why we laugh. In order to understand the problems that arise from the relief theory one must understand the theory itself. Through this understanding we can then evaluate the two major faults, which plague this theory of humor. The first of these being that humor does not necessarily follow a physiological process and the second, more severe flaw; the theory itself is constructed around logic that is quite faulty.

The relief theory originates from the thoughts of the 19th century, English philosopher Herbert Spencer. In the writing *The Physiology of Laughter* Spencer states, "Nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion." This scientific approach that humor is simply a response to some form of pent up energy was explored and revised by famed Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in his 1905 text *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. It is in this book that Freud set forth our modern understanding of the relief theory. Freud not only restates Spencer's original theorem but goes on to add, albeit quite vaguely, that the act of joking results in the conservation of energy. This is somehow achieved through a complex process that involves either redirecting energy that would have been otherwise used to repress sexual feelings or by releasing energy left over from solving an everyday challenge. Although both men may, in their writings, somewhat stumble through an explanation of these processes their intentions are quite clear: humor can be explained as a physiological way to manage stress, or in other words "blow off steam."

Even in this brief explanation in the mere principals of the relief system, two severe problems arise. The first of these quarrels is the simple notion that most humor occurs quite sporadically and therefore does not seem to complete the tedious process of building and releasing some form of esoteric energy. It is true that often we laugh to "break the ice" or because we encounter a situation that we feel awkward (i.e. we trip and fall in front of a group of peers), however most humor seems to involve something completely arbitrary to our own situations. We laugh at sitcoms and cartoons not to relieve our own personal anguish but rather as a reaction to what we see and hear. More so, Spencer's theory suggests that humor would seem to be a most unavoidable emotion when we are most agitated, when in fact no theoretical example or personal anecdote is needed to negate this notion.

The second complication, like Freud's work with the theory, builds upon the problems explained in the first quarrel. It is in Freud's work that he fails to address how to recognized the differences between laughter that is voluntary and laughter that is a mere reaction, or the difference between "saved energy" and any other form of energy. In his attempt to explain why humans laugh Freud does little to support how the relief theory stands apart from any other explanation of why we laugh. This is essentially the biggest criticism of the relief theory: it is not clear. Not only is it unclear to the armchair philosopher or the casual phenomenologist, but also it is still quite cryptic even to the trained professional. Freud's idea of "economizing energy" is underdeveloped and he fails to illustrate what purpose this saved, or rather unused energy serves. Likewise Spencer's assumption that simply because some physical reactions are accompanied by a related release of mental energy, all physical reactions are accompanied by a pertinent release is little more than pseudo-science. The main argument against the relief theory is simply that it is not only unclear, but it finds its axioms in logic that is rather faulty.

In conclusion, the relief theory seems to reach too far, it grasps at principles that are too theoretical for their real-world application. Humor is by its archaic definition simply an emotion and emotions need not necessarily bide by such stringent physiological explanations. It is in these two criticisms that the relief theory falls well short of its intended goal, to explain why we laugh.

FINAL DRAFT ADD-ON #1: Acknowledgements paragraph. Anyone except me or one of your cited sources (e.g. Critchley) who helped you write your paper in any way. Paste to the end of your [turnitin.com](https://www.turnitin.com) submission.

FINAL DRAFT ADD-ON #2: Reflection paragraph. a) What do you like most about your paper (strengths)? b) What do you like least (weaknesses)? c) What did you work hardest on? d) What else would you like me to know about your process or experience of writing this paper? e) Taking the requirements for this assignment and this course into consideration, what grade should your paper earn? Paste to the end of yr [turnitin.com](https://www.turnitin.com) submission.

WORKSHOP EXERCISE #1: Devil's advocacy. a) State your thesis aloud to a partner from memory. *Do not* look at your paper. b) Your partner should write your thesis down and read it back to you until you're satisfied that they understand it. If you're lacking an explicit thesis, it will be worthwhile to linger on this part of the exercise. c) Your partner should then state the *exact opposite* of your thesis aloud. If it can't be reversed in such a fashion, it isn't really an arguable thesis and you should backtrack to the previous steps. d) Write this anti-thesis down and read it back to your partner until (s)he is satisfied that you understand it. e) Write a dialogue of at least 10 lines in which you argue your thesis with supporting logic and examples and your partner argues the anti-thesis by objecting to your logic and giving counter-examples. Ideally you will be able to 'conquer' these objections and counter-examples by the end of the dialogue. Your partner can help you, in other words the dialogue should be written as agonistic but you can actually collaborate to write each other's lines.