

BOYS' HUMOR AND LANGUAGE

WHAT CAN I DO IN MY CLASSROOM?

From Chapters 7 and 12 of *Boy Writers: Reclaiming Their Voices* by Ralph Fletcher

Humor: Being friendlier to boys' humor is an important way we can widen the circle and invite boys to be full citizens in our writing classrooms. This starts with recognizing what they are trying to do in this regard.

- If boys want to “write funny” encourage them to examine texts such as *The Dumb Bunnies* by Dav Pilkey, or any of the Jon Scieszka picture books, for what makes these books humorous.
- Before you outlaw a particular kind of boys' humor, make sure you understand it. Recognize that your appraisal of boys' humor often reveals as much about you as it does about the writing.
- Take your boys' humor seriously. Look for the intelligence behind the apparent silliness.
- Try using a new mental language for your thinking on this subject. Instead of “humor,” think “voice.” Instead of “silly,” think “satire.”
- Be as generous as possible with their humor. Make a distinction between what's destructive and what is merely irreverent. When students step over the line (and they will), take it on a case-by-case basis.
- Give yourself permission to enjoy their humor. Boys really can be funny. Laugh!

Boys who include humor in their writing are not necessarily acting out, fooling around, or trying to get attention. Rather, humor gives them a crucial way to express their authentic voices. This is certainly true for me. I make presentations to teachers and if I were not allowed to interject any humor into my talks they would be impoverished indeed. Using humor is more a way to keep things from getting dull; it is a part of who I am, a crucial slice of my heart. It gives me a way of expressing the absurd human dilemma of being a finite mortal being in an infinite universe.



Language: “When we use certain phrases . . . we run the risk of being judgmental (or at least viewed that way by the kids). Judging boys in this way will limit our ability to teach the child. Children easily detect people being judgmental, and it means that they are no longer safe to explore. Judgment stands in the way of the relationship between teacher and student, and teaching is nothing if not relational” —Peter H. Johnston

As teachers we should be more accepting with the edgy language boys employ in their writing, even those phrases that test the limits of what we deem acceptable. At the same time we need to be more careful with our language when talking to them or even about them.

- Take the hot air out of ramped-up words and expressions. Use language that is neutral and descriptive instead of judgmental when talking to kids about their writing.
- Be flexible when students use slang and popular expressions in their writing.
- Take a firm stance against students who make sarcastic put-downs of other students during writing. You simply cannot allow it.
- Look for positive ways of describing boy writing, both when speaking to students and about them to peers. Instead of, “Oh, he's always grandstanding” you might say, “He sure does know his audience. He's skilled at writing the kinds of stories and poems that connect with other boys in the class.”
- Beware of making derogatory comments that may inflict lasting damage. We don't need to warily “walk on eggshells” around our boys, or sugarcoat our language when speaking with them. (“I'm a rather direct, blunt, tough-love conferrer,” Ioke Nia says, “and I have grand conferences with the boys.”) But spoken words, which seem to dissolve harmlessly into the air really can leave a lasting impression. Every writing teacher should remember the physician's creed: first, do no harm.