



Overview: This lesson focuses on the importance of detecting irony in order to grasp a speaker's point of view -- and therefore the meaning of the text. (Lesson Duration: 4 hours)

Standards:

- **RL.11-12.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **RL.11-12.6:** Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Objectives:

- The students will learn to identify the tone in which a text is written, distinguishing a serious or straightforward tone from one that is ironic or insincere.
- Students will learn to distinguish an author's actual, underlying point from one that is ironic, sarcastic, or humorously meant.

Materials:

Classroom copies of the following works:

- "[A Modest Proposal](#)," by Jonathan Swift
- [MagnaSoles article](#)
- A list of [words for tone](#)
- The opening chapter of [Northanger Abbey](#), by Jane Austen

Procedure:

Before the Lesson

This lesson would fit well into a class on British literature or rhetoric/composition. Ideally, students should be familiar with the concepts of tone, diction, satire, speaker, point of view, and theme.

Activity 1: Want to Buy Some MagnaSoles?

Practice

Note: If your class is an honors, AP, or other advanced group with good reason to be confident in their ability to read below the surface, present them with [the following article](#) from the March 31, 1999 issue of the satiric publication *The Onion*, which appeared in a slightly edited form on the Advanced Placement Language and Composition exam some years ago. Avoid



telling the students the article came from *The Onion* or that it is satiric. Ask only for them to define the following questions in brief, informal writing:¹

- What is the author's point?
- What does the author wish you to believe about Magna-Soles?
- What is your most convincing piece of evidence to support your assertions above?

Revolutionary New Insoles Combine Five Forms Of Pseudoscience

March 31, 1999

MASSILLON, OH—Stressed and sore-footed Americans everywhere are clamoring for the exciting new MagnaSoles shoe inserts, which stimulate and soothe the wearer's feet using no fewer than five forms of pseudoscience.

"What makes MagnaSoles different from other insoles is the way it harnesses the power of magnetism to properly align the biomagnetic field around your foot," said Dr. Arthur Bluni, the pseudoscientist who developed the product for Massillon-based Integrated Products. "Its patented Magna-Grid design, which features more than 200 isometrically aligned Contour Points™, actually soothes while it heals, restoring the foot's natural bio-flow."

"MagnaSoles is not just a shoe insert," Bluni continued, "it's a total foot-rejuvenation system."

According to scientific-sounding literature trumpeting the new insoles, the Contour Points™ also take advantage of the semi-plausible medical technique known as reflexology. Practiced in the Occident for over 11 years, reflexology, the literature explains, establishes a correspondence between every point on the human foot and another part of the body, enabling your soles to heal your entire body as you walk.

¹ Students who are generally more adept at discerning tone and irony in writing will almost instantly "get" that this article is humorous. Students who are less adept will tend to read the article as a straightforward endorsement of the product. If the class in general is not highly skilled in this reading ability, then reading the "Magna-Soles" article should be saved until after direct instruction about satire, tone, and reading for humor has taken place, otherwise students will feel "tricked" by the teacher. Some honors/AP students may feel slightly frustrated if they did not see the humor initially, but if they are confident readers, they will not feel *discouraged* and *unable* -- obviously a very, very crucial distinction.

But while other insoles have used magnets and reflexology as keys to their appearance of usefulness, MagnaSoles go several steps further. According to the product's website, "Only MagnaSoles utilize the healing power of crystals to re-stimulate dead foot cells with vibrational biofeedback... a process similar to that by which medicine makes people better."

In addition, MagnaSoles employ a brand-new, cutting-edge form of pseudoscience known as Terranometry, developed specially for Integrated Products by some of the nation's top pseudoscientists.

"The principles of Terranometry state that the Earth resonates on a very precise frequency, which it imparts to the surfaces it touches," said Dr. Wayne Frankel, the California State University biotrician who discovered Terranometry. "If the frequency of one's foot is out of alignment with the Earth, the entire body will suffer. Special resonator nodules implanted at key spots in MagnaSoles convert the wearer's own energy to match the Earth's natural vibrational rate of 32.805 kilofrankels. The resultant harmonic energy field rearranges the foot's naturally occurring atoms, converting the pain-nuclei into pleasing comfortrons."

Released less than a week ago, the \$19.95 insoles are already proving popular among consumers, who are hailing them as a welcome alternative to expensive, effective forms of traditional medicine.

"I twisted my ankle something awful a few months ago, and the pain was so bad, I could barely walk a single step," said Helene Kuhn of Edison, NJ. "But after wearing MagnaSoles for seven weeks, I've noticed a significant decrease in pain and can now walk comfortably. Just try to prove that MagnaSoles didn't heal me!"

Equally impressed was chronic back-pain sufferer Geoff DeAngelis of Tacoma, WA.

"Why should I pay thousands of dollars to have my spine realigned with physical therapy when I can pay \$20 for insoles clearly endorsed by an intelligent-looking man in a white lab coat?" DeAngelis asked. "MagnaSoles really seem like they're working."

Small-Group Discussion

Students should be broken up into small groups of 3-5 (avoid having groups fewer than 3 for this exercise, as it is helpful to have an odd number of students in case a "tiebreaker" is needed). Ask the students to share their readings of the article and their answers to the questions and to **come to universal consensus** about the three questions asked above.



Note: Students should use textual evidence to support their point of view. Other students should politely request any assertions or claims made during discussion (e.g., “Yeah, the point is that Magna-Soles are awesome”) **to be backed up with evidence from the text.** Students should also practice dealing with opposing ideas and counter-claims (e.g., “No, dude -- it’s totally saying the opposite”) by politely requesting other people in the group to substantiate their claims with evidence.

Whole-Class Discussion

Essentially, the teacher’s role will be to sort out the claims and counter-claims. Often, there will be some division in how to “read” this document.² Teachers can divide the board into a T-square with the two basic ideas present on either side -- some version of “Magna-Soles are an excellent product” and “Magna-Soles are quack medicine” on the top. Students can offer proof and explanation for their assertions as follows:

Magna-Soles are awesome		Magna-Soles are quack medicine	
Evidence	Explanation	Evidence	Explanation
"MagnaSoles is not just a shoe insert," Bluni continued, "it's a total foot-rejuvenation system."	This is pretty straightforward -- MagnaSoles rejuvenate your feet.	...said Dr. Arthur Bluni, the pseudoscientist who developed the product for Massillon-based Integrated Products.	As an employee of this company and the person who developed the product, Bluni is not a credible, unbiased, objective source of reliable information. He’s trying to sell his company’s product. Also, the word “pseudoscientist” is a dead give-away that

² As a general note, it is a good idea never to turn into the “text apologist” or The Person Who Has the Right Answer. There will be some students who didn’t see that this was satirical. A tactical error would be to say some variation on, “Oh, it’s satirical. Here’s why. [Subtext: You didn’t get it!]” Instead, **use the discussion format to get the other students to argue your point for you.** If Student X believes the text is satirical, ask her to defend her position with evidence from the text and explain why that evidence proves her point. Be teacher-as-skeptic even when -- maybe especially when -- the student really does have the “right answer.” If students read the text incorrectly, that information is much easier to accept when it comes from peers -- and it’s very likely they won’t have been the only ones who misread it.



			he’s not a real scientist -- and this article is not about a real product.
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Essentially, as the evidence starts mounting up in favor of MagnaSoles not being an actual product, the discussion can shift into what one could call the “tells” -- those moments when the speaker or author “gave away” that this article was meant humorously.

Some key pieces of evidence include...

- The repeated use of the word “pseudoscience”
- The phrase “semi-plausible medical technique”
- The phrase “a welcome alternative to expensive, **effective** forms of traditional medicine”
- The fact that Helene Kuhn’s twisted ankle would have stopped hurting after seven weeks anyway, regardless of the MagnaSoles
- The final sentence, “Why should I pay thousands of dollars to have my spine realigned with physical therapy when I can pay \$20 for insoles clearly endorsed by an **intelligent-looking man in a white lab coat?**” DeAngelis asked. “MagnaSoles really **seem like** they’re working.”

At that point, the discussion can shift to the nature of satire and its purpose.

Activity 2: Is it Satire?

Lecture Points

Satire can be defined as the use of humor as a method of correction. Satirists usually take as their target some element of societal, individual, or universal human behavior they see as being in need of correction and use humor or mockery -- sometimes gentle, sometimes vicious -- as the tool for exposing hypocrisy or folly to ridicule.

Understanding when an author is being satiric, though, is not so easy. Much of it is a matter of **determining tone**, which can be an extremely difficult task. Regrettably often, we have a meager vocabulary of words to describe tone and often oversimplify, saying (for instance) that a tone of ecstatic jubilation is “happy” or that one of Kurt Cobain-like depression is “sad.” A list of [words for tone](#) would be very helpful to help “zero in” on more specific (and more helpful) descriptors.

Ultimately, though, it’s often the case that figuring out if a text is being ironic is really a matter of looking for a gap or discrepancy between **the subject being described** and the **way in which that subject is being talked about or described**. When there’s a “disconnect” between the normal or expected way to refer to a subject, there may be irony afoot.



For example, we would normally refer to the subject of death by using a solemn or serious (or at least straightforward) tone, or use a tone of loving admiration to describe some feature of the beloved person that is truly extraordinary or grand. We would normally not use a tone or diction or genre more suited for epic and heroic deeds in order to describe a silly or trivial event.

But what if we don't?

Practice

Present students with the following selection. Have them identify the subject of the author's passage and the tone or manner in which the subject is being described.

- a. What is the subject of this passage?
- b. What is the tone with which the subject is described? Hint: Use two different but complementary tones to describe the passage, e.g., "cautiously optimistic," or "doubtfully angry."
- c. Do the tones match the subject? Pay particular attention to any boldfaced words.
- d. Does anything "stick out" or seem inconsistent with the subject or tone?

Passage 1 - *Northanger Abbey*, by Jane Austen

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man... He had a considerable independence besides two good livings — **and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters**. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, **as anybody might expect**, she still lived on — lived to have six children more — to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself. Catherine never could learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid. Her mother was three months in teaching her only to repeat the "Beggar's Petition"; and after all, her next sister, Sally, could say it better than she did. Not that Catherine was always stupid — by no means; **she learnt the fable of "The Hare and Many Friends" as quickly as any girl in England**.

Small-Group and Whole-Group Discussion

Students should ideally see that there is a disconnect between the tone and subject. The tone, rather than being a straightforward and sincere description of the heroine, is one that is gently condescending (and sometimes not so gently). The author (Jane Austen) quickly tips her hand by pointing out how the heroine, Catherine Morland, is very unheroine-like -- certainly not a



heroine in the classic model of “beautiful girl who grew up in harsh circumstances as an orphan of an abusive or neglectful father but whose intelligence and pluck distinguish her from the common herd.” To put it another way, Catherine is no Mary Sue³ -- nor even Bella from *Twilight*. In fact, Austen uses this novel (*Northanger Abbey*) to mock the silly, overdone Gothic fiction that can properly be called *Twilight’s* great-grandmothers, the novels of Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, and other writers who would have been quite happy to encounter the occasional sparkly vampire.

What follows are some helpful questions students can ask themselves to determine whether or not a piece is satiric/ironic or straightforward:

1. What is the subject of the piece?
2. What is the tone in which the piece is written?
3. Is it the same tone throughout, or are there parts which “stick out” and do not seem consistent with the norm?
4. Is there a disconnect or contrast between the tone and the subject?
5. What is the diction the author uses?
6. Is the diction consistent with the subject, or does the author sometimes use an unusual or inappropriate word or phrase to describe the subject?

Activity 3: The Purpose of Satire

Lecture Points

Bottom line, although it’s fun to be able to identify satire, students can’t stop there. Remember, the basic purpose of satire is not just mockery (That’s more the job of parody, for instance), but **correction**: the satirist wants to improve the human condition by using mockery to get the job done.

To figure that out, we must identify the satirist’s true target. What’s she or he really mocking here?

Guess What’s Coming for Dinner?

Did you ever teach Jonathan Swift’s classic satirical essay “[A Modest Proposal](#)”? The full title is “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public.” The speaker, clearly a wealthy Englishman (Swift himself was Irish), after soberly and factually setting out the

³ For a delightful definition of this very useful term -- a key ingredient in ill-written fiction -- see “[150 Years of Mary Sue](#),” by Pat Pflieger.



devastating situation of child poverty in Ireland (then under crushing British dominance), after computing that only approximately 15% of all fertile Irish couples can actually support their own children, and after exploring the limited financial opportunities available for the children of Irish couples, maturely and gravely suggests that the best solution to the problem of poverty in Ireland is to (Wait for it!)...eat the babies.

It is almost inevitable that several students in the class will not see that Swift cannot possibly be serious. Those students will assert -- often in the strongest of terms -- that the Irish writer and Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, a man who so angered the British government with his *Drapier's Letters* that they offered a 300-pound reward for turning the man in -- was sincerely advocating that British landlords commit infant cannibalism.⁴

It's really only at the end of the essay that Swift tips his hand and we see the real bias of the author (as opposed to his speaker) peeking forth. The tone turns to one of frustration as Swift lists the other "expedients" for solving the problem of Irish poverty -- much more reasonable ideas that have been proposed before (often by Swift himself) to no avail.

Practice

Students may answer the questions below individually or in small groups. **Note:** More advanced readers should ideally do this exercise without the aid of the boldfaced sentences.

- In what way do the highlighted passages represent a change from the speaker's previously sober, serious tone at the beginning of the essay?
- How does the repetition of the "Of [doing XYZ], of [doing XYZ]..." help the speaker convey his point?
- Is there one "thesis moment" in which the author just plain comes out and indicates what his actual, real target or goal happens to be?

I desire the reader will observe, that I calculate my remedy for this one individual Kingdom of Ireland, and **for no other that ever was, is, or, I think, ever can be** upon Earth. Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: Of taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound: Of using neither clothes, nor household furniture, except what is of our own growth and manufacture: Of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury: Of curing the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women: Of introducing a vein of parsimony, prudence and temperance: Of **learning to love our country**, wherein we differ even from Laplanders, and the inhabitants of Topinamboo: ... Of being a little cautious **not to sell our country and consciences for nothing**: Of teaching landlords to **have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants**. Lastly, of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shop-keepers, who, if a resolution could now be taken to buy only our native goods, would

⁴ This is another example of **where your students should do the arguing for you**. If you try to do it and reveal what the text is "really about," students tend to remain unconvinced -- and resistant to the idea that authors, like people, do not always mean what they say.



immediately unite to cheat and exact upon us in the price, the measure, and the goodness, nor could ever yet be brought to make one fair proposal of just dealing, though often and earnestly invited to it.

Therefore I repeat, let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients, 'till he hath at least some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice.

Ideally, students should see that Swift's real target is not the Irish peasantry, who are largely helpless to change their situation, but the British landlords of Irish territory who do little but squeeze the country dry. Students can then be encouraged to revisit the essay and ask, "Where do we see Swift 'tip his hand' earlier in the piece"?

Distinguishing satire from seriousness, distinguishing an author's perspective from that of his narrator or character, and understanding where an author's persona and a character's persona begin and end is by no means easy. What follows are some good questions to ask students to keep in mind as they read any text -- not just one they already know is satirical.

Fundamental Questions of Satire

The purpose of all satire, at least in theory, is to improve morals, fight injustice, expose hypocrisy, puncture pretensions, and in sum, improve the human condition by pointing at it and giving a hearty "HA-HA," like Nelson from *The Simpsons*.

1. What is the author's actual "target" here? Who or what is being held up to ridicule? How do you know?
2. What condition does the author wish to improve? What characteristic or trait is being mocked? Is it genuinely worthy of being mocked?
3. Why is *that* specific trait, person, event, or characteristic being mocked and not another?
4. Often in a satire, an author will "tip the hand" by letting the satiric persona drop and letting his or her (presumably) real feelings be put on display. Does that occur in this piece? Where? Why?
5. If the author uses extreme methods (as does Swift in his essay) to revolt, disgust, shock, or appall the readers, why go for the "shock treatment"? What would a more modest, more gentle approach simply fail to accomplish?



Closure and Assessment

One way to close and assess this lesson is to revisit the piece with which it began -- the MagnaSoles article. Students can be given the following prompt about which to write:

Knowing now that the MagnaSoles piece is intended to be a humorous satire, ask yourself **what element of society or American culture is being satirized here?** Find no fewer than three elements within the MagnaSoles article that substantiate your point and in a well-constructed essay crafted around answering the bolded question above and proving it with evidence. For additional credit, find an actual advertisement for a product which -- although serious -- resembles the MagnaSoles article in its use of diction, "pseudoscience," or other features.

Further Reading

Some excellent examples of satire, irony, or understatement are as follows. Even short selections are enormously helpful in fine-tuning students' "ears" to listen for the slight smirk of an ironic tone. Please note that some selections may not be appropriate for all classes.

- Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
- Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"
- Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (Note: Please pre-screen. The material deals with the process of embalming and may be disturbing for some students.)
- John Dryden, "MacFlecknoe"
- Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, [The Spectator](#) (This is basically an 18th-century blog!)
- Appropriate clips from Jon Stewart, The Daily Show
- Appropriate articles from [The Onion](#), a satiric paper