

Breaking the Ice

Essay by Dave Barry

What makes us LAUGH?

COMMON CORE

RI 4 Analyze the impact of specific word choice on meaning and tone. **RI 6** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text.

There have probably been times when you told a joke and nobody laughed. Maybe you heard a joke that made other people laugh but that you didn't think was funny. How you react to a joke or tell a joke reflects your unique sense of humor. Some people are very good at finding humor in everyday situations and communicating it to others. The essay writer you are about to read has built a career out of making people laugh.

QUOTE IT "Laughter is the best medicine." "Laugh and the world laughs with you." "Laughter is the closest distance between two people." There are dozens of quotes about laughter. Now it is your turn to add to the list. Think of the kinds of things that make you laugh and how laughing makes you feel. Then write your own quote about laughter.



● TEXT ANALYSIS: STYLE AND TONE

Have you ever been told, “Don’t use that tone with me”? In literature, **tone** is a writer’s attitude toward a topic. Tone is part of a writer’s **style** and often can be described in one word, such as *sarcastic* or *sentimental*.

In Dave Barry’s essay, he uses a unique tone to relate a humorous story about a dating experience. As you read, use these tips to help you identify the tone of the essay.

- Identify the topic. Ask: “What is the writer writing about?”
- Notice significant words and phrases. Do most of them convey a similar attitude?
- Notice images and descriptions. Are they exaggerated, silly, or frightening?
- Read parts of the essay aloud, focusing on the feelings behind the word. What do they tell you about the writer?

● READING SKILL: IDENTIFY A WRITER’S POINT OF VIEW

In addition to making you laugh, a humorous essay conveys the **writer’s point of view**, or opinion, about the topic. After you identify the essay’s topic, **make inferences**, or logical guesses, about the writer’s point of view. You make an inference by looking for clues in the essay and then combining them with your own knowledge and experience.

As you read, record words and phrases that reveal the writer’s opinion in a chart like the one shown. Then jot down what you have learned about the writer’s point of view from each example.

<i>Topic of the Essay</i>	
<i>Words and phrases that reveal writer’s point of view</i>	<i>What this tells me about the writer’s point of view</i>
<i>“The most sensible way to ask a girl out is to walk directly up to her. . . . I never did this.”</i>	<i>Barry thinks that dating in high school is not easy.</i>

Dave Barry

born 1947

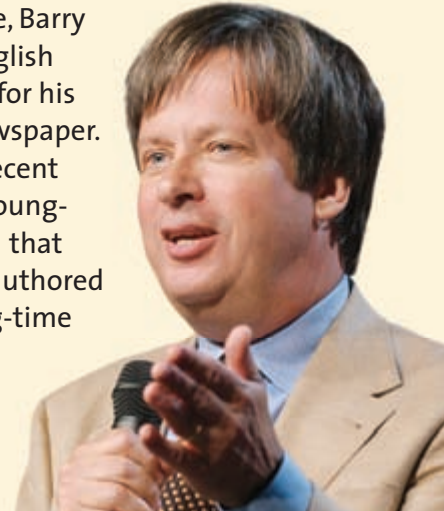
Journalism’s Funny Man

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Dave Barry is best known for the columns he has written for the *Miami Herald* newspaper. These columns became so popular that they soon ran in more than 500 newspapers in the United States and abroad.

Inspired by Everyday Life

Barry’s columns, including “Breaking the Ice,” often exaggerate and poke fun at the daily life of his readers. As one reviewer put it, Barry has a gift for “squeezing every ounce of humor out of a perfectly ordinary experience.” Barry is often inspired by his personal experiences—what can go wrong with house repairs, parenting teenagers, and, of course, careers in newspapers.

In college, Barry studied English and wrote for his college newspaper. His most recent work is a young-adult novel that he has co-authored with a long-time friend.



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BREAKING THE ICE

Dave Barry



As a mature adult, I feel an obligation to help the younger generation, just as the mother fish guards her unhatched eggs, keeping her lonely vigil day after day, never leaving her post, not even to go to the bathroom, until her tiny babies emerge and she is able, at last, to eat them. “She may be your mom, but she’s still a fish” is a wisdom nugget that I would pass along to any fish eggs reading this column.

But today I want to talk about dating. This subject was raised in a letter to me from a young person named Eric Knott, who writes:

▲ Analyze Visuals

As you look at this picture, **predict** what the essay will be about.

10 I have got a big problem. There's this girl in my English class who is *really* good-looking. However, I don't think she knows I exist. I want to ask her out, but I'm afraid she will say no, and I will be the freak of the week. What should I do? **A**

Eric, you have sent your question to the right mature adult, because as a young person I spent a lot of time thinking about this very problem. Starting in about eighth grade, my time was divided as follows:

Academic Pursuits: 2 percent.

Zits: 16 percent.

Trying to Figure Out How to Ask Girls Out: 82 percent.

20 The most sensible way to ask a girl out is to walk directly up to her on foot and say, "So, you want to go out? Or what?" I never did this. I knew, as Eric Knott knows, that there was always the possibility that the girl would say no, thereby leaving me with no viable option¹ but to leave Harold C. Crittenden Junior High School forever and go into the woods and become a bark-eating hermit whose only companions would be the gentle and understanding woodland creatures. **B**

"Hey, ZITFACE!" the woodland creatures would shriek in cute little Chip 'n' Dale voices while raining acorns down upon my head. "You wanna DATE? HAHAAAAAAAAHAHA." **C**

30 So the first rule of dating is: Never risk direct contact with the girl in question. Your role model should be the nuclear submarine, gliding silently beneath the ocean surface, tracking an enemy target that does not even begin to suspect that the submarine would like to date it. I spent the vast majority of 1960 keeping a girl named Judy under surveillance,² maintaining a minimum distance of 50 lockers to avoid the danger that I might somehow get into a conversation with her, which could have led to disaster:

JUDY: Hi.

ME: Hi.

40 JUDY: Just in case you have ever thought about having a date with me, the answer is no.

WOODLAND CREATURES: HAHAAAAAAAAHAHA.

The only problem with the nuclear-submarine technique is that it's difficult to get a date with a girl who has never, technically, been asked. This is why you need Phil Grant. Phil was a friend of mine who had the

A STYLE AND TONE

Reread lines 1–12. What is the **topic** of the essay?

B WRITER'S POINT OF VIEW

Reread lines 21–25. What are Barry's feelings about high school dating? Explain how he conveys his opinion.

C STYLE AND TONE

Reread lines 26–28. What is Barry's attitude toward his younger self? Note how the **style** of using capital letters helps communicate this attitude.


1. **viable option**: choice that has a possibility of working.

2. **surveillance** (sər-vā'ləns): close observation.

ability to talk to girls. It was a mysterious superhuman power he had, comparable to X-ray vision. So, after several thousand hours of intense discussion and planning with me, Phil approached a girl he knew named Nancy, who approached a girl named Sandy, who was a direct personal friend of Judy's and who passed the word back to Phil via
50 Nancy that Judy would be willing to go on a date with me. This procedure protected me from direct humiliation. . . . **D**

Thus it was that, finally, Judy and I went on an actual date, to see a movie in White Plains, New York. If I were to sum up the romantic ambience³ of this date in four words, those words would be: "My mother was driving." This made for an extremely quiet drive, because my mother, realizing that her presence was hideously embarrassing, had to pretend she wasn't there. If it had been legal, I think she would have got out and sprinted alongside the car, steering through the window. Judy and I, sitting in the backseat about 75 feet apart, were also silent, unable
60 to communicate without the assistance of Phil, Nancy, and Sandy. **E**

After what seemed like several years we got to the movie theater, where my mother went off to sit in the Parents and Lepers Section. The movie was called *North to Alaska*, but I can tell you nothing else about it because I spent the whole time wondering whether it would be necessary to amputate my right arm, which was not getting any blood flow as a result of being perched for two hours like a petrified snake on the back of Judy's seat exactly one molecule away from physical contact.

So it was definitely a fun first date, featuring all the relaxed spontaneity of a real-estate closing,⁴ and in later years I did regain some feeling in
70 my arm. My point, Eric Knott, is that the key to successful dating is self-confidence. I bet that good-looking girl in your English class would LOVE to go out with you. But YOU have to make the first move. So just do it! Pick up that phone! Call Phil Grant.  **F**

D STYLE AND TONE

Reread lines 44–51. Note Barry's description of Phil Grant's "superhuman" abilities. How would you describe the tone of this paragraph?

E STYLE AND TONE

Does Barry seem to enjoy the drive to the movie theater? Note words and phrases that give his description of the ride either a positive or a negative tone.

F WRITER'S POINT OF VIEW

Reread lines 68–73. Barry writes that self-confidence is "the key to successful dating." What other words or phrases in these lines reveal his point of view? Explain.

3. **ambience** (ăm'bē-əns): atmosphere; environment.

4. **spontaneity of a real-estate closing**: A real-estate closing is a meeting where a piece of property transfers from a seller to a buyer. Many required documents are signed, in a very formal, unspontaneous way.

RI 4 Analyze the impact of specific word choice on meaning and tone. **RI 6** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text.

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** How does Dave Barry ask Judy out on a date?
- 2. Recall** Where do they go on their date?
- 3. Clarify** Why is Barry uncomfortable on the date?

Text Analysis

- 4. Identify Writer's Point of View** Refer to the chart you completed as you read the essay. What inference did you make about Barry's overall opinion of his topic? What experiences does he draw on to support his opinion?
- 5. Examine Style and Tone** In his essay, Barry imitates an advice columnist, a writer who helps readers solve problems. Which examples of Barry's humorous **tone** tell you that this is not a typical advice column? Record the examples in a chart like the one shown and note why they are funny.

<i>Examples of Humor</i>	<i>Why This Is Funny</i>
<i>"Your role model should be the nuclear submarine"</i>	

- 6. Analyze Style and Tone** On the basis of this example of Barry's style, how would you describe his sense of humor to someone who hasn't read anything by him?

Extension and Challenge

- 7. Humorous Letter** Write a humorous letter of advice about a social situation that you might encounter. Begin by writing a question asking for advice, such as, "Who should pay for a meal on a first date?" or "How do I introduce my friends to my parents?" Then think of funny things that could happen, such as discovering that you are wearing different-colored socks when you go to meet your date. Remember that you can use exaggeration and vivid images to convey a humorous **tone**.

What makes us LAUGH?

Refer to the quote you wrote to reflect your own views about laughter. Does the quote fit Dave Barry's essay? Explain why or why not.