



Humor: Serious Business Syllabus

STANFORD GSB | MKTG 346 | SPRING 2026

The Big Picture

WHEN & WHERE

Spring 2026, Tuesdays (April 7 - May 26);
2:50-5:30 PM (S1) and 6:00-8:30 PM (S2)
McClelland 101D (CoLab).

WEBSITE & MATERIALS

Book: Humor, Seriously (optional)

FACULTY

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TEACHING TEAM

Course Captain, Patricia Sonora -
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Teaching Assistants, [Dora Wedner](#), [Shane Goldstein](#)

The Class

Leadership has shifted. Once, leaders were expected to be revered; today, they must be authentic, especially in times of disruption and uncertainty. To meet this moment, the leaders with a competitive edge are those that master an unexpected skill: humor... seriously.

In a fast-changing world, humor sparks connection, defuses tension, and fuels innovation. When fueled by power and purpose, those who lead with levity create clarity and drive bold action — enabling leaders to not just navigate change, but to elevate themselves and those around them.

Humor: Serious Business is a course about blending power, purpose, and levity. It's about reading the room and building technology that does the same. It's about using humor strategically to build influence when needed, strengthen relationships when resilience is at a premium, and navigate with grace when the stakes are high.

This is a practice-heavy course. You'll learn the behavioral science of humor, diagnose your Humor Style, and apply concrete techniques from professional comedians to everyday moments in leadership and life. You'll hear from leaders who use humor as a competitive edge in the highest stakes — from Rear Admiral Wyman Howard, former Commanding Officer of US Navy SEAL Team Six, to McKinsey Global Managing Partner Bob Sternfels on scaling humor across cultures. You'll practice tools used by Broadway performers minutes before they go on stage with Tony Award winner Anthony Veneziale, and you'll workshop personal stories with real-time feedback from Michael Lewis, author of *Moneyball*, *The Big Short*, and *Going Infinite*. You'll leave the course with practical tools to:

- Uncover the behavioral science of humor — why it builds trust, signals status, and shapes how people experience you as a leader.
- Find your comedic voice — diagnose your humor style, practice techniques from professional comedians, and know when and how to use humor toward your goals.
- Deploy levity strategically — read the room, defuse tension, build influence when the stakes are high, and build high performing and joyful teams.
- Build a levity practice that outlasts the course — your signature story, levity list, and the habits that keep humor alive in your life.

Note: this course is a flipped classroom, which means the real action happens in class. You'll dig into readings, videos, and activities before each session so we can spend our time together doing what matters most—testing ideas, getting hands-on, and practicing humor in real time (fun, right?).

Guests

David Gerard, Magician, Mentalist, and Facilitator (April 21)

David Solomon, Chairman and CEO of Goldman Sachs (Wed April 22, 11:45-12:45, M109)

Carrie Solomon, Film Writer (Wed April 22, 11:45-12:45, M109)

Mike Peng, CEO, IDEO (April 28)

Bob Sternfels, Chairman and Global Managing Partner of McKinsey & Company (April 28)

Wyman Howard, Rear Admiral Navy Seals, former Commanding Officer of Seal Team Six (April 28)

Michael Kives, CEO, K5 Global (May 5, 12-1, G101)

Anthony Veneziale, Broadway performer and COO of Freestyle+ (May 12)

Michael Lewis, Author (May 19)

Demis Hassabis, CEO of DeepMind (May 22, 11:45-1 CEMEX)

Policies

Attendance matters. Excused absences don't affect your grade ([defined](#) by GSB). You may miss 1 class unexcused with no impact to the grade. You can make up a second unexcused absence with an assignment. To notify the team of your absence, email Patricia (sonorap@stanford.edu) in advance.

A Note on AI This class begins with what makes us irreplaceably human — humor, connection, humanity. These are our foundation and our moat. As the course progresses, we'll bring AI into the conversation — not as a replacement, but as an amplifier.

The goals here are deeply human: self-awareness, creativity, leadership, empathy. AI can serve those goals when used thoughtfully — deepening insight, sparking new creative directions, strengthening reflection. But AI is a collaborator, not a shortcut. We expect you to engage with it critically, bringing your own thinking, judgment, and voice to everything you produce. The point isn't to outsource the work — it's to make your learning richer and your leadership sharper.

Overview and Readings

DAY 1 - April 7 THE POWER OF HUMOR | How to harness humor

We'll start with a grounding in the power of humor from the world of behavioral science. We'll explore your unique humor style and the styles of others. You'll start making small mindset shifts to find levity in your life.

- PREP: **Read:** Humor is Serious Business by Joel Stein [[link](#)]
Read: The Cost of Being Humorless by Joel Stein [[link](#)]
Podcast: [Dr. Paul Zak](#), professor of neuro-economics, on humor and the brain. [[link](#)]
Activity: Pre-Class Survey, including Humor Typology Quiz (Due April 3rd @ 12pm) [[link](#)]

DAY 2 - April 14 THE ANATOMY OF HUMOR | How to craft your humor

We'll delve into the world of comedy, exploring what makes something humorous, training our brains to look at the world through a different lens, and crafting humor using proven techniques from professional comedians. You'll practice writing and delivering humor using these tactics.

- PREP: **Read:** Chapter 3 of *Humor, Seriously: The Anatomy of Funny* [[link](#)]
Read: How Taylor Tomlinson Nailed Her Closing Joke [[link](#)]
Podcast: [Matt Klinman](#), former head writer for The Onion, shares the writers' room process. [[link](#)]
Podcast: [Anne Libera](#) & [Kelly Leonard](#) (Second City) on creating humor and offsetting risks. [[link](#)]

DAY 3 - April 21 GREY AREAS OF HUMOR | How to walk the line

What people find funny (and appropriate) is far from universal, and no one nails it every time. We'll dive into the gray areas of humor, exploring why humor fails happen, how to read the room, and what to do when you accidentally cross a line. You'll gain tools to recognize, diagnose, and make it right.

- GUESTS: **David Gerard**, Magician, Mentalist, and Facilitator
Also, David Solomon, Chairman and CEO of Goldman Sachs & **Carrie Solomon**, Film Writer (4/22)
- PREP: **Read:** Terry Crews: Becoming Unembarrassable [[link](#)]
Read: How to be Humorous, Not Offensive at Work [[link](#)]
Podcast: [Sarah Cooper](#), viral standup comedian and writer on humor, work, and life. [[link](#)]

DAY 4 - April 28 PUTTING HUMOR TO WORK | How to humor under pressure

Humor lands when it is yours. We'll explore how authentic humor can be a multiplier-amplifying trust, connection, and influence at the same time. You'll learn strategies for balancing authority and approachability and see how a wide range of leaders (from business to the military) make a habit of using humor effectively and authentically.

- GUESTS: **Mike Peng**, CEO of IDEO
Bob Sternfels, CEO of McKinsey & **Wyman Howard**, Navy Seals
- PREP: **Read:** Shifting Global Culture at McKinsey & Co. [[link](#)]
Read: Levity in the US Navy SEALS [distributed in class]
Podcast: [Sec of State Madeleine Albright](#), U.S. Ambassador on humor in high stakes. [[link](#)]
Activity: Multipliers & Bio with Levity (Due April 27th @ 8am)

LEAD WITH HUMOR | How to create cultures of levity

DAY 5 - May 5

Personal stories are some of your greatest assets as leaders. After listening to a master storyteller during a lunch session, we'll create personal "story banks" and explore how leaders deliberately create and amplify cultures of joy: the conditions, habits, and signals that make levity contagious across a team or organization.

GUESTS: **Michael Kives**, CEO, K5 Global (Note: 12-1pm in Gunn 101)

PREP: **Read:** Leading with Humor [[link](#)]

Read: Sara Blakely (Spanx): Using Humor to Launch a Company [[link](#)]

DAY 6 - May 12 OWN THE ROOM | How to tell your story

Great material means so much more when you can deliver it well. We'll learn storytelling and performance techniques from the world of Broadway and improv, exploring how to craft your story, own a room, and connect with any audience. You'll practice tools used on Broadway and put them into action in an interactive workshop.

GUESTS: **Anthony Veneziale**, Co-CEO of Freestyle+ and Cofounder of Broadway's Freestyle Love Supreme

PREP: **Podcast:** [Yoonjin Ha](#), actor in Hamilton, Only Murders in the Building; re: performance. [[link](#)]

Watch: "Stumbling towards intimacy": An improvised TED Talk [[link](#)]

Activity: Rough Draft Signature Story (*Due May 11th @ 8am*)

DAY 7 - May 19 BRING HUMOR TO LIFE | How to lead a life with levity

Today you'll lock in your levity list — guiding principles for a life that's true to you, dynamic, and designed around what actually sustains you. Then you'll workshop your Signature Story with legendary author Michael Lewis, mastering the balance between gravity and levity before you take the stage.

GUEST: **Michael Lewis, Author**

Also, Demis Hassibis, CEO and Founder, Google DeepMind (5/22 11:45-1 in CEMEX)

PREP: **Read:** (After)words with Michael Lewis [[listen](#) or [read](#)]

Watch (optional): Michael Lewis MasterClass [[watch](#) with [guest pass](#)]

Podcast: **Terry Crews**, actor & former professional football player on being unembarrassable [[link](#)]

Activity: Final Signature Story (*Due May 18th @ 8am*)

DAY 8 - May 26 TAKE THE STAGE | How to bring it all together

You'll share your Signature Story with the class, bringing to life the power of balancing gravity with levity. We'll share a toolkit for taking the learnings forward and pop champagne and sparkling waters to celebrate you becoming a humor hero in just eight short weeks. Look at you go!

PREP: **Memorize** your 1 minute Signature Story; be ready to deliver it without notes on stage.

We can't wait to get started. Seriously.