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Humanities

Examining and Comparing Critiques of the Education System

Several aspects of our education system were put into practice over 100 years ago, but with all the changes that have come since that time, such as new technology and a shift in skills necessary for successful careers, does our education system still help students? Many say it doesn't, citing criticism of standardized tests and arguing that the evaluation structure doesn't adequately demonstrate that students are learning what they should. Argumentative writings, such as the *USASB* article "Standardized Testing: Debate and Criticism" by Dennis Frayne, argue that standardized testing harms students. However, some pieces take a different approach to make a similar argument. One such unique approach is satire. Satire dates back to the Roman Empire and involves presenting a topic as ridiculous to criticize an aspect of society. *The Onion* is a popular satirical news site that features several satirical pieces. A satire by *The Onion* staff, "Tips For Last-Minute Test Cramming," satirizes students' preparation and critiques the education system. Although the argumentative article from *USASB* and the satire from *The Onion* both criticize the current education system, the argumentative article's failed use of rhetorical devices disengages readers and imposes conclusions, whereas the satire engages readers and leads them to its critiques through irony and other satirical devices.

By drawing the audience's attention to the issue through direct language, imagery, and humor, the satire engages the audience with the topic in a novel way; in contrast, Frayne fails to use third-person language, metaphors, or tone effectively to engage the reader. The satire begins

by explaining that it will give “helpful tips as you cram for a test” (Staff). The author directly addresses the reader, setting the stage for the remainder of the piece, in which the author continues to direct his points to the reader. By referring to the reader directly in the second person, the author effectively singles them out and draws their attention. On the other hand, the *USASB* article's use of the third person, through “students, teachers, and parents,” makes it difficult for the audience to connect with the piece (Frayne). Although the audience may belong to one of those categories, they are not singled out, creating distance between the reader and the piece. The *USASB* article further distances and disengages the audience by using general terms rather than specific imagery. The only specifics the author uses are metaphors, such as describing teachers as “teaching to the test” rather than what they believe they should teach (Frayne). However, even this is a general metaphor and doesn't provide readers with specifics to captivate them. By contrast, *The Onion*'s satire employs vivid imagery throughout, such as describing a desk as a “sensory deprivation study pod,” an unusual yet specific and relatable image that engages the reader with the story (Staff). Furthermore, the author appears to offer an innocuous tip about studying with others, but he frames it as “a great way to enlist the help of other students just as hopelessly lost as you are” (Staff). This anticlimax surprises the audience, which creates humor. *The Onion* effectively uses humor to capture the audience's attention, prompting them to continue reading. Additionally, although the tip's ending suggests that studying is a lost cause for the student, the use of “great” at the beginning creates an upbeat, energetic tone. This exciting emotion further engages the audience. Not only does the article from the *USASB* lack humor, but its detached and factual tone, such as describing testing as “high-stakes testing,” which does not put the reader into a specific scenario where they can feel the stress or relive a similar moment, makes readers disengaged and uninterested in the article (Frayne). It is essential for a writing

piece to engage the reader, otherwise it won't be able to get the point across to the audience, and the satire from *The Onion* does this well through addressing the audience directly, vivid descriptions, and humor, but the article from *USASB* fails to engage the audience due to third person language, failed metaphors, and a detached tone.

Although the *USASB* article appeals to logos, it weakens its argument by attributing fault to individuals, whereas the satire creates ridiculous situations that reveal faults in the overall system. The *USASB* article presents logical arguments demonstrating why standardized testing can be detrimental to students. One such argument is that “educators focus primarily on test-related content,” which can reduce the quality of education for students (Frayne). However, this blames teachers. Frayne also makes similar arguments that place the fault on students. By blaming students or teachers, he shifts focus to individuals, which is contrary to his intended purpose of revealing systemic flaws in education. Furthermore, the spotlight on individuals places readers on the defensive, reducing their receptivity to the critiques Frayne presents. Another issue is that, by stating the problem, the author attempts to impose his reasoning on the reader. Frayne tells readers how testing causes “pressure [that] can negatively impact student well-being” rather than showing how pressure leads to worsened health or what the effects look like (Frayne). This backfires, reducing the reader's ability to understand the conclusion. On the other hand, *The Onion's* satire allows readers to draw their own conclusions. The satire presents a ridiculous situation through tips such as “highlight every line of text,” which is a hyperbole and clearly counterproductive (Staff). The absurdity of the situation helps put the reader at ease rather than in a defensive posture and doesn't place blame on any individual. However, because there is a connection to relatable experiences, such as the need to try and memorize everything through whatever method possible, even if it doesn't help, the reader sees the underlying truths of reality.

By rendering the situation absurd, *The Onion*'s satire effectively shifts the focus from individuals within the system to the system itself, putting readers at ease, unlike the defensive stance readers are placed in by the article's excessive appeal to logos in *USASB*.

Because the focus is on the whole system, the satire effectively mounts a critique of the entire education system through irony, whereas the excessive repetition in the *USASB* article fails to demonstrate the impact of the system's faults. *The Onion*'s satire depicts a student cramming for a last-minute exam and seeking tips to avoid failing. One of the tips outlined in the satire is that cramming is much less effective than studying in advance. However, studying in advance is clearly not feasible for someone seeking last-minute guidance. This impossible tip is followed by "hopefully that helps," which makes it clear that the author is using verbal irony, since the tip cannot help (Staff). The satire in *The Onion* also effectively employs situational irony by suggesting that a student's study plan should "more effectively manage [their] nervous breakdown" (Staff). This is unexpected in a situation where the student is preparing for an exam, as they should focus their time on studying. Instead, the student must take time out of their schedule to manage their emotions. Yet both examples of irony reveal underlying truths about students' realities: the design of the system makes it impossible for students to study effectively and maintain their health. Reading the description of the situation allows readers to reach their own conclusions. Meanwhile, the article from the *USASB* attempts to use repetition to ingrain a logical argument in the reader's mind. Frayne repeatedly mentions how standardized testing causes a "teaching to the test mentality" or that standardized testing is "perpetuating educational inequalities" (Frayne). Repeating vague arguments doesn't help the reader understand why they are happening or what effects they have on students. In fact, the repeated arguments also cause the reader to lose trust in the author's argument because it makes them feel as though the author

does not have sufficient compelling evidence to support his argument. The satire in *The Onion*'s use of irony helps readers see specific harms the education system inflicts and understand the author's criticism, whereas the *USASB* article fails to make its argument clear through repetition.

While the *USASB* article and *The Onion* satire both criticize the education system, the *USASB* article's use of rhetorical devices is ineffective, leaving readers uninterested and imposing conclusions on them, whereas *The Onion* satire employs satirical devices, such as irony, to engage readers and guide them toward its criticism. The *USASB* article presents valid arguments regarding the education system. Still, its delivery falls flat and fails to engage the reader or explain why they should care, ultimately failing to persuade them that standardized testing is harmful. On the other hand, *The Onion's* satire adopts a fresh stance, employing unique approaches to engage readers. This helps them understand the realities of the education system and leads them to critique it. Although the pieces differ in how effectively they convey their points, they will hopefully not only open people's eyes to the fact that the education system is hurting students rather than helping them, but also push people to take action to change the system for the better.

Works Cited

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