



Lesson Activity: “A Theory of Jerks” by Eric Schwitzgebel

AP[®] English Language and Composition

Duration Approximately 45 minutes

Materials Needed

- UWorld “A Theory of Jerks” Passage:

The following excerpt is from a recent non-fiction article.

“A Theory of Jerks” by Eric Schwitzgebel

Line First, no one is a perfect jerk or a perfect sweetheart. Human behavior—of course!—varies hugely with context. Different situations (department meetings, traveling in close quarters) might bring out the jerk in some and the sweetheart in others.

5 Second, the jerk is someone who culpably fails to appreciate the perspectives of others around him. Young children and people with severe cognitive disabilities aren't capable of appreciating others' perspectives, so they can't be blamed for their failure

(complete passage is included at the end of the lesson activity)

- Notebook paper/pencils
- Optional: poster copies or handouts of UWorld “Qualification,” “Colloquial vs Formal,” and “Context” pages (included at the end of the lesson activity)

College Board[®] Standards

Skills

- **1.B:** Explain how an argument demonstrates an understanding of an audience's beliefs, values, or needs.
- **3.A:** Identify and explain claims and evidence within an argument.

Objectives

- **RHS-1.C:** The purpose of a text is what the writer hopes to accomplish with it. Writers may have more than one purpose in a text.
- **RHS-1.F:** Writer's perceptions of an audience's values, beliefs, needs, and background guide the choices they made.



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Activity Objectives

Identify and Analyze techniques authors use to make texts engaging and accessible to their audience.

Activity Instructions

1. **Read** the passage to students or have them read it independently, in pairs, or in small groups.
2. **Pose** the following activity prompts to your students. Have them work together to formulate their answers or respond individually. When they are finished, have students share their answers with the class and discuss.
3. After the activity, **print** the “Qualification,” “Colloquial vs Formal,” and “Context” images as posters to hang in your classroom to reinforce the literary concepts.

Activity Prompts

- Throughout this passage, the author uses a blend of formal and colloquial language. **List** four examples of each. What is the effect of this combination on the reader?
- In paragraph 8, the author uses the word “self-disapprobation” to describe a response to criticism. **What** context clues help you determine what this word means?
- **What** is the author’s claim in this passage? **How** does the author use qualification in his argument?

Lesson Extension

The following UWorld questions can be used for additional practice, a quick formative assessment, homework, or small group interventions:

- **Assign** the 10 multiple choice questions for this passage in the UWorld learning platform.
- **Ask** students to make a list of techniques that the author used to make this scientific article engaging and accessible to a broad audience. Have them include textual citations to provide evidence of each technique. Then, have them share their list with other students and discuss how effective these techniques were in engaging the audience with the topic and conveying a clear argument.

Guiding Questions

When writing about a scientific topic, **what** can an author do to make the text engaging and accessible for the reader?

What could such an author do to maintain credibility?



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Passage

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Line First, no one is a perfect jerk or a perfect sweetheart. Human behavior—
of course!—varies hugely with context. Different situations (department
meetings, traveling in close quarters) might bring out the jerk in some and the
sweetheart in others.

5

Second, the jerk is someone who culpably fails to appreciate the
perspectives of others around him. Young children and people with severe
cognitive disabilities aren't capable of appreciating others' perspectives, so
they can't be blamed for their failure and aren't jerks. (“What a selfish jerk!”
10 you say about the baby next to you on the bus, who is hollering and flinging
her slobbery toy around. Of course you mean it only as a joke. Hopefully.)
Also, not all perspectives deserve equal treatment. Failure to appreciate the
outlook of a neo-Nazi, for example, is not a sign of jerkitude—though the true
sweetheart might bend over backwards to try.

15

Third, I've referred to the jerk as “he,” since the best stereotypical examples
of jerks tend to be male, for some reason. But then it seems too gendered to
call the sweetheart “she,” so I've made the sweetheart a “he” too.

20 I've said that my theory might help us assess whether we, ourselves,
are jerks. In fact, this turns out to be a strangely difficult question. The
psychologist Simine Vazire has argued that we tend to know our own
personality traits rather well when the traits are evaluatively neutral and
straightforwardly observable and badly when the traits are highly value laden
25 and not straightforward to observe.

If you ask people how talkative they are, or whether they are relatively high-
strung or mellow, and then you ask their friends to rate them along those
same dimensions, the self-ratings and the peer ratings usually correlate well—
30 and both sets of ratings also tend to line up with psychologists' attempts to
measure such traits objectively. Why? Presumably because it's more or less
fine to be talkative and more or less fine to be quiet, okay to be a bouncing
bunny and okay instead to keep it low-key, and such traits are hard to miss
in any case. But few of us want to be inflexible, stupid, unfair, or low in
35 creativity. And if you don't want to see yourself that way, it's easy enough to
dismiss the signs. Such characteristics are, after all, connected to outward
behavior in somewhat complicated ways; we can always cling to the idea that
we've been misunderstood by those who charge us with such defects. Thus,
we overlook our faults.



Passage cont.

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40 With Vazire’s model of self-knowledge in mind, I conjecture a correlation of
approximately zero between how one would rate oneself in relative jerkitude
and one’s actual true jerkitude. The term “jerk” is morally loaded, and
rationalization is so tempting and easy! Why did you just treat that cashier
so harshly? Well, she deserved it—and anyway, I’ve been having a rough
45 day. Why did you just cut into that line of cars at the last moment, not waiting
your turn to exit? Well, that’s just good tactical driving—and anyway, I’m in a
hurry! Why did you seem to relish failing that student for submitting his essay
an hour late? Well, the rules were clearly stated; it’s only fair to the students
who worked hard to submit their essays on time—and that was a grimace not
50 a smile.

Since probably the most effective way to learn about defects in one’s
character is to listen to frank feedback from people whose opinions you
respect, the jerk faces special obstacles on the road to self-knowledge,
55 beyond even what Vazire’s theory would lead us to expect. By definition, he
fails to respect the perspectives of others around him. He’s much more likely
to dismiss critics as fools—or as jerks themselves—than to take the criticism
to heart.

60 Still, it’s entirely possible for a picture-perfect jerk to acknowledge, in a
superficial way, that he is a jerk. “So what, yeah, I’m a jerk,” he might say.
Provided that this admission carries no real sting of self-disapprobation, the
jerk’s moral self-ignorance remains. Part of what it is to fail to appreciate
the perspectives of others is to fail to see your jerkishly dismissive attitude
65 toward their ideas and concerns as inappropriate.

Ironically, it is the sweetheart who worries that he has just behaved
inappropriately, that he might have acted too jerkishly, and who feels driven
to make amends. Such distress is impossible if you don’t take others’
70 perspectives seriously into account. Indeed, the distress itself constitutes a
deviation (in this one respect at least) from pure jerkitude: Worrying about
whether it might be so helps to make it less so. Then again, if you take
comfort in that fact and cease worrying, you have undermined the very basis
of your comfort.

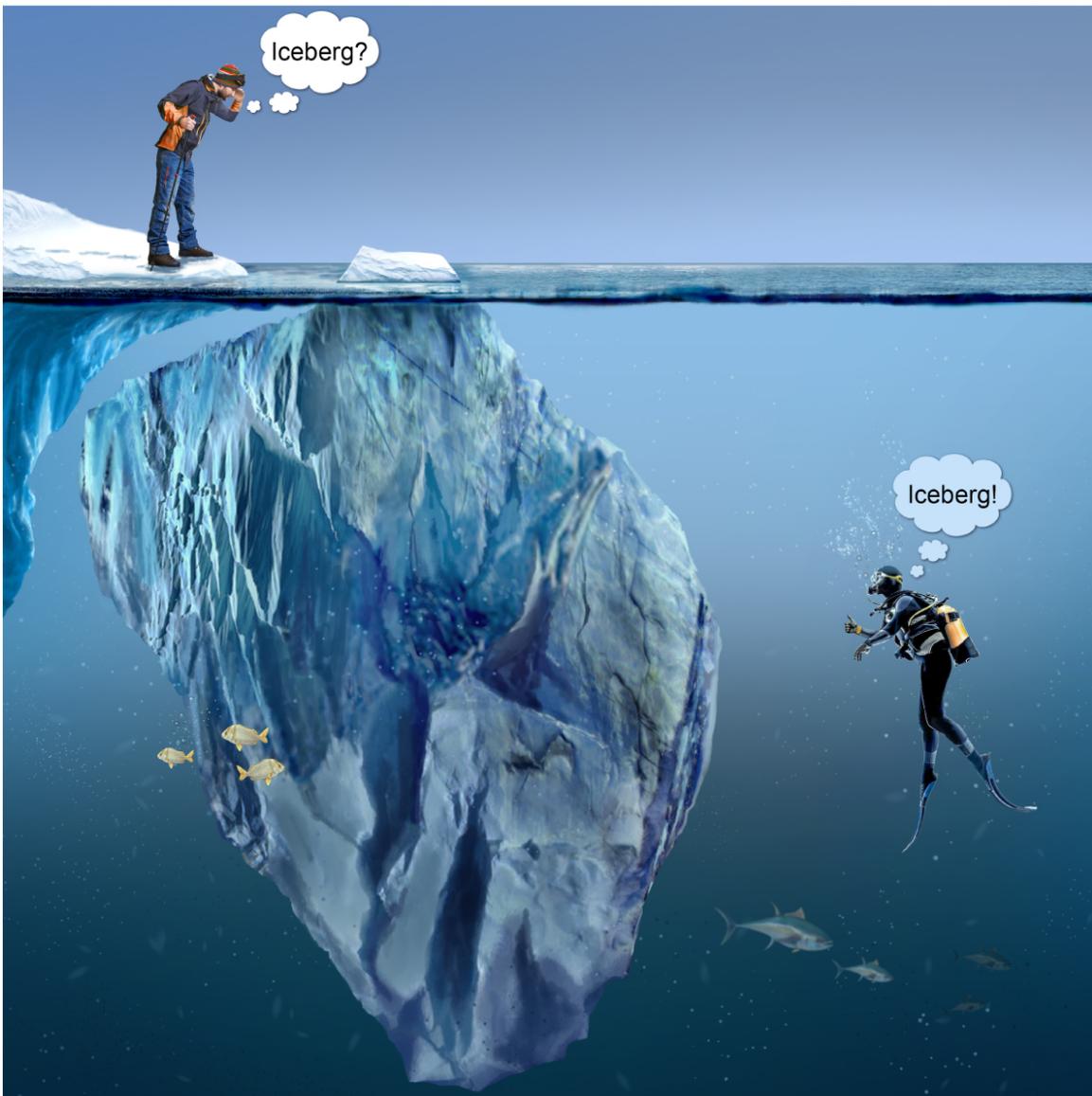
Schwitzgebel, Eric. “A Theory of Jerks.” Aeon Media Group, June 4, 2014.
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Context

Surrounding text that clarifies the meaning of a word or idea





Qualification

Added information that puts conditions or limitations on a claim



Claim

Jumping out of an airplane is a terrible idea...

Qualification

...unless you have a parachute.



Colloquial vs Formal

Colloquial language
used in casual or everyday conversations

This sort of stuff is...
Lucky for us...
You got to keep clear of...
...yucky smell.

Formal language
suitable for serious or academic discussions

These matters are rather...
Fortunately...
Be careful to avoid...
...unpleasant odor.