

# **LAUGHLAB**

**THE SCIENTIFIC SEARCH FOR THE  
WORLD'S FUNNIEST JOKE**

**FINAL REPORT**

**3<sup>RD</sup> OCTOBER 2002**

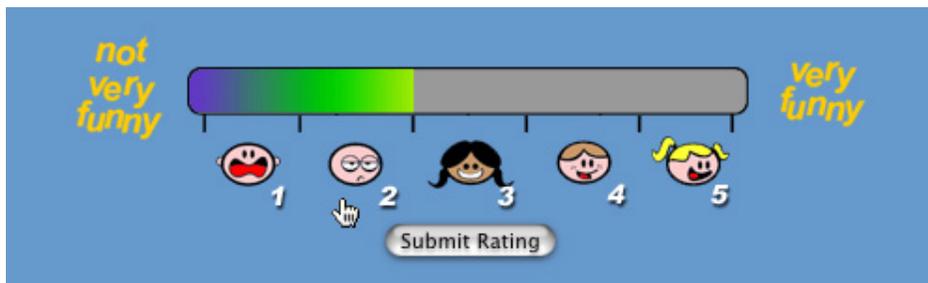
## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>THE WINNING JOKE</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>IN SECOND PLACE</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>LEAGUE TABLE OF HUMOUR</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>TOP JOKES ACROSS THE WORLD</b>	<b>8</b>
Top joke in UK	
Top joke in USA	
Top joke in Canada	
Top joke in Australia	
Top joke in Belgium	
Top joke in Germany	
<b>LAUGHLAB DISCOVERS THE BRAIN'S FUNNYBONE</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>JOKE COMPLEXITY AND THE BRAIN</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>THE UK REGIONS</b>	<b>13</b>
Top joke in England	
Top joke in Wales	
Top joke in Scotland	
Top joke in Northern Ireland	
<b>FUN FACTS FROM LAUGHLAB</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>GENERAL INFORMATION</b>	<b>15</b>

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2001 we embarked on one of the world's largest, and most unusual, scientific experiments. The project aimed to find the world's funniest joke and answer important questions about the psychology of humour.

LaughLab was carried out as part of Science Year in the UK and was the largest scientific study ever into humour. For the past twelve months we have asked people from all around the world to submit their favourite jokes and judge how funny other people's jokes were by using the special "Giggleometer" below.



LaughLab captured the public's imagination – we received over 40,000 jokes and almost 2 million ratings. In fact, the experiment has been such a success that it has recently been awarded a Guinness World Record and the LaughLab book, containing all of our results and top gags, was published on 3<sup>rd</sup> October by Random House.

All of the data collected throughout the year has been stored on the LaughLab computers. In December 2001 we released some of our preliminary results - we have now analysed all of our data and are delighted to announce our final findings.

## THE WINNING JOKE

After much careful scrutiny, we are proud to announce our winning joke. This joke received higher ratings than any other gag.

Drum roll.....

**A couple of New Jersey hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn't seem to be breathing, his eyes are rolled back in his head. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps to the operator: "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator, in a calm soothing voice says: "Just take it easy. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. The guy's voice comes back on the line. He says: "OK, now what?"**

This winning joke was submitted by Gurpal Gosall, a 31 year old psychiatrist from Manchester in the UK. He told LaughLab that:

I like the joke as it makes people feel better, because it reminds them that there is always someone out there who is doing something more stupid than themselves.

So why did this joke perform so well? Dr Richard Wiseman, the psychologist behind the Laughlab project, said:

This joke is interesting because it works across many different countries, appeals to men and women, and young and old alike. Many of the jokes submitted received higher ratings from certain groups of people, but this one had real universal appeal. Also, we find jokes funny for lots of different reasons – they sometimes make us feel superior to others, reduce the emotional impact of anxiety-provoking situations, or surprise us because of some kind of incongruity. The hunters joke contains all three elements – we feel superior to the stupid hunter, realise the incongruity of him misunderstanding the operator and the joke helps us to laugh about our concerns about our own mortality."

**NOTE:** For the sake of brevity, the following, slightly shortened version of this joke will appear on the giant poster unveiled to mark the end of LaughLab:

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses.

He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, "My friend is dead! What can I do?". The operator says "Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says "OK, now what?"

## IN SECOND PLACE

In second place came the joke that was leading the pack when we announced our preliminary results in December:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson go on a camping trip. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and go to sleep.

Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

"I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes" replies Watson.

"And what do you deduce from that?"

Watson ponders for a minute.

"Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe... What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes is silent for a moment. "Watson, you idiot!" he says. "Someone has stolen our tent!"

This joke was submitted by Geoff Anandappa, from Blackpool in Britain. We recently told Geoff that his joke had been piped to the post by the hunters joke – here is his reaction:

I can't believe I got knocked out in the final round! I could've been a contender... I want a re-match, and I warn you, this time I'm going to fight dirty! Did you hear the one about the actress and the bishop?

## LEAGUE TABLE OF HUMOUR

We asked everyone participating in LaughLab to tell us which country they were from. We analysed the data from the ten countries that rated the highest number of jokes. The following 'league table' lists the countries, in the order of how funny they found the jokes:

### **Most funny:**

Germany  
France  
Denmark  
UK  
Australia  
The Republic of Ireland  
Belgium  
USA  
New Zealand  
Canada

### **Least funny**

Fascinating differences also emerged between nations in terms of the jokes they found funny.

People from **The Republic of Ireland, the UK, Australia and New Zealand** expressed a strong preference for jokes involving word plays, such as:

Patient: "Doctor, I've got a strawberry stuck up my bum."

Doctor: "I've got some cream for that."

**Americans and Canadians** much preferred gags where there was a sense of superiority – either because a person looked stupid, or was made to look stupid by another person, such as:

Texan: "Where are you from?"

Harvard grad: "I come from a place where we do not end our sentences with prepositions."

Texan: "Okay – where are you from, jackass?"

Finally, many European countries, such as **France, Denmark and Belgium**, liked jokes that were somewhat surreal, such as:

An Alsatian went to a telegram office, took out a blank form and wrote:

"Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof."

The clerk examined the paper and politely told the dog: “There are only nine words here. You could send another ‘Woof’ for the same price.”  
“But,” the dog replied, “that would make no sense at all.”

These European countries also enjoyed jokes that involved making light of topics that often make us feel anxious, such as death, illness, and marriage. For example:

A patient says: “Doctor, last night I made a Freudian slip, I was having dinner with my mother-in-law and wanted to say: “Could you please pass the butter.” But instead I said: “You silly cow, you have completely ruined my life”.”

Interestingly, **Germany** was the exception. Germans did not express a strong preference for any type of joke - this may well explain why they came first in our league table of funniness – they do not have any strong preferences and so tend to find a wide spectrum of jokes funny.

Dr Richard Wiseman commented

These results are really interesting – it suggests that people from different parts of the world have fundamentally different senses of humour. Humour is vital to communication and the more we understand about how people’s culture and background affect their sense of humour, the more we will be able to communicate effectively.

## TOP JOKES IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Here are some of the top jokes in different countries:

### Top joke in UK

A woman gets on a bus with her baby. The bus driver says: "That's the ugliest baby that I've ever seen. Ugh!" The woman goes to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming. She says to a man next to her: "The driver just insulted me!" The man says: "You go right up there and tell him off – go ahead, I'll hold your monkey for you."

### Top joke in USA

The American data proved to be somewhat strange. Dave Barry is a well known humourist whose columns are syndicated in many American newspapers. In January 2002 he kindly devoted an entire column to LaughLab. At the end of the column he urged readers to submit jokes that simply ended with the punch line:

'There's a weasel chomping on my privates.'

Within just a few days we had received over 1500 'weasel chomping' jokes.

One weasel joke scored very highly in the USA and almost became the funniest joke in America. Here it is:

At the parade, the Colonel noticed something unusual going on and asked the Major: "Major Barry, what the devil's wrong with Sergeant Jones' platoon? They seem to be all twitching and jumping about."

"Well sir," says Major Barry after a moment of observation. "There seems to be a weasel chomping on his privates."

However, ignoring the weasels, the top American joke was...

A man and a friend are playing golf one day at their local golf course. One of the guys is about to chip onto the green when he sees a long funeral procession on the road next to the course. He stops in mid-swing, takes off his golf cap, closes his eyes, and bows down in prayer. His friend says: "Wow, that is the most thoughtful and touching thing I have ever seen. You truly are a kind man." The man then replies: "Yeah, well we were married 35 years."

### **Top joke in Canada**

When NASA first started sending up astronauts, they quickly discovered that ballpoint pens would not work in zero gravity. To combat the problem, NASA scientists spent a decade and \$12 billion to develop a pen that writes in zero gravity, upside down, underwater, on almost any surface including glass and at temperatures ranging from below freezing to 300 C. The Russians used a pencil.

### **Top joke in Australia**

This woman rushed to see her doctor, looking very much worried and all strung out. She rattles off: "Doctor, take a look at me. When I woke up this morning, I looked at myself in the mirror and saw my hair all wiry and frazzled up, my skin was all wrinkled and pasty, my eyes were bloodshot and bugging out, and I had this corpse-like look on my face! What's WRONG with me, Doctor!?"

The doctor looks her over for a couple of minutes, then calmly says: "Well, I can tell you that there ain't nothing wrong with your eyesight...."

### **Top joke in Belgium**

Why do ducks have webbed feet?

To stamp out fires.

Why do elephants have flat feet?

To stamp out burning ducks.

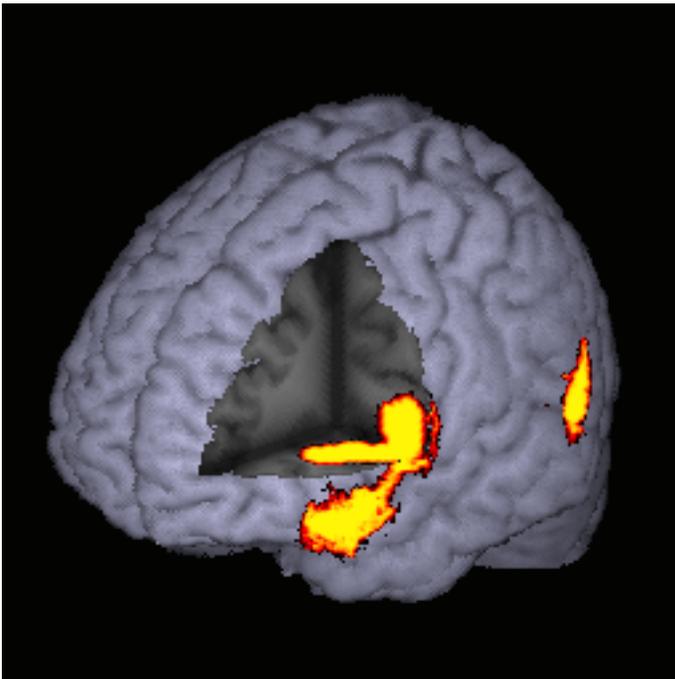
### **Top joke in Germany**

A general noticed one of his soldiers behaving oddly. The soldier would pick up any piece of paper he found, frown and say: "That's not it" and put it down again. This went on for some time, until the general arranged to have the soldier psychologically tested. The psychologist concluded that the soldier was deranged, and wrote out his discharge from the army. The soldier picked it up, smiled and said: "That's it."

## LAUGHLAB DISCOVERS THE BRAIN'S FUNNYBONE

At the end of the LaughLab project, we carried out a brain scan (using a technique known as Magnetic Resonance Imaging) of people listening to some of our best jokes. The results are amazing. They show that there is a very precise area of the brain involved in understanding why a joke is funny.

As shown in the image below, this area is mainly located towards the back of the frontal lobes. Interestingly, this fits in with other research suggesting that people who have damaged this part of the brain often lose their sense of humour.



But why should this section of the brain be so important to our sense of humour?

Most jokes work because they surprise us – they set us thinking in one direction, and then we hear the punchline and realise that there is a completely different way of seeing the situation.

For example, take the old joke:

Two fish in a tank.

One turns to the other and says 'Do you know how to drive this?'

The first line makes us think the fish are in a fish tank – then the second makes us realise that they actually are in an army tank!

The part of the brain shown in the image above (called the Prefrontal cortex) plays a vital role in the type of flexible thinking needed to understand a joke. It makes sense of the punchline and produces a strong sense of surprise.

## JOKE COMPLEXITY AND THE BRAIN

We also asked people who took part in LaughLab to answer questions that involve making various estimates, such as:

How many words are there on one page of a typical paperback novel?

- A) Under 500
- B) 500-600
- C) 600-700
- D) 700-800
- E) Over 800

Research suggests that people who are good at this type of question (the correct answer is under 500) tend to have good frontal lobe activation, whilst people who make incorrect estimates do not. Interestingly, people who tended to answer this question correctly tended to prefer relatively complex jokes, such as...

A scientist and a philosopher were being chased by a hungry lion. The scientist made some quick calculations, he said "its no good trying to outrun it, its catching up". The philosopher kept a little ahead and replied " I am not trying to outrun the lion, I am trying to out run you"!

Whereas people who answered incorrectly, tended to like more straightforward jokes, such as...

Which day of the week do fish hate?.....  
Fry-Day.

This sort of data will give us important insights into the way in which our brains affect our sense of humour.

## THE UK REGIONS

We also asked participants from the UK to tell us whether they were from Wales, Scotland, England or Northern Ireland. Our data has revealed that the Welsh found the jokes funniest, followed by the English, then people from Northern Ireland and then the Scots.

Here are the top jokes from the regions.

### Top joke in England

Two weasels are sitting on a bar stool. One starts to insult the other one. He screams, "I slept with your mother!" The bar gets quiet as everyone listens to see what the other weasel will do. The first again yells, "I SLEPT WITH YOUR MOTHER!" The other says, "Go home dad you're drunk."

### Top joke in Wales

A turtle was walking down an alley in New York when he was mugged by a gang of snails. A police detective came to investigate and asked the turtle if he could explain what happened. The turtle looked at the detective with a confused look on his face and replied "I don't know, it all happened so fast."

### Top joke in Scotland

I want to die peacefully in my sleep like my grandfather. Not screaming in terror like his passengers

### Top joke in Northern Ireland

A doctor says to his patient, 'I have bad news and worse news'.  
'Oh dear, what's the bad news?' asks the patient.  
The doctor replies, 'You only have 24 hours to live'.  
'That's terrible', said the patient. 'How can the news possibly be worse?'  
The doctor replies, 'I've been trying to contact you since yesterday'.

## **FUN FACTS FROM LAUGHLAB**

Just for fun, we had the LaughLab computer count the number of words in every joke that people submitted. According to the data, jokes containing one hundred and three words are the funniest. Interestingly, the winning 'hunters' joke is 102 words long – almost the perfect length for a joke!

Many of the jokes submitted contained reference to animals. We found that jokes mentioning ducks were seen as funnier than other jokes. And so it's official – ducks are the funniest comedy animals. Perhaps it's because of their beaks, or webbed feet, or odd shape. Regardless, the implication is clear – if you are going to tell a joke involving an animal, make it a duck.

Our computers recorded the date and time that each person from the UK rated the jokes in LaughLab. Careful analysis of the data revealed that people found the jokes funniest on the 7<sup>th</sup> October at 6.03 in the evening. Perhaps we have scientifically discovered the funniest moment of the year.

The most frequently submitted joke was:

What's brown and sticky?  
A stick.

This joke was submitted to LaughLab over 300 times. And no-one ever found it funny.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

LaughLab is a project of the BA (British Association for the Advancement of Science), devised by Dr Richard Wiseman, as part of Planet Science (formerly Science Year)

<http://laughlab.co.uk>

Dr Richard Wiseman (University of Hertfordshire) investigates the psychology of the paranormal, deception and luck. He has carried out many mass participation experiments, and frequently appears in the media.

<http://phoenix.herts.ac.uk/PWRU/RWhomepage.html>

the BA is a unique nationwide organisation with an open membership, dedicated to the communication and appreciation of science. We embrace all areas of science, forging links between them and working with them to communicate, discuss and promote all aspects of science and its influence on our lives.

<http://www.the-ba.net/>

Planet Science is a packed calendar of events, projects & resources designed to stimulate the imagination about science & technology. It's for everyone, but it's focused particularly on people between the ages of 10 and 19 and the adults around them.

<http://www.scienceyear.com/home.html>