

The original April Fools' pra ...

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The original April Fools' prank was the wild-goose chase.

In the 18th century, the Scottish would send a "gowk" (a gullible person) around town with a note that said, "Never laugh, never smile, send the gowk another mile," according to Alex Boese, proprietor of the Museum of Hoaxes Web site. The receiver of the note would come up with another errand for the gowk, who'd be handed off from house to house on a wild-goose chase.

Pranking has since diversified, of course, and though you can debate the differences between a hoax, a prank and a practical joke, there are certain elements to consider when preparing any of these. In honor of April Fools' Day, here's a buffet of insights into pranking.

And if you have a problem with us advocating bad behavior, here's our editor's direct line: 202-334-6354. Call her up and ask for Little Debbie Snack Cake. (She loves that.)

-- D.Z.

You can find a gowk and send him off to get an unobtainable item (like striped paint or a one-ended stick), but Boese offers these practical jokes as simple ways to fill your prank quota today:

Use a rubber band to depress the handle of a kitchen sink's extra nozzle (you know, that detachable spray thing) so that it spritzes anyone who turns on the water.

Dip cotton balls in chocolate and arrange them on a platter like truffles. Place them in a central location at home or work. Advertise the availability of the "treats." Delight in the reactions.

Cover an area with sticky notes. It can be anything: a door, a cubicle. But a whole car is the ideal.

"If somebody isn't getting annoyed, it's not really successful," says Boese, who believes we prank to vent some repressed hostility. "It has to be slightly obnoxious."

From your desk stretches the office landscape: gray, sedate, cubicular. It begs to be stirred up.

The element of surprise is what makes pranks such a nice contrast to the workplace environment, says psychologist Ed Dunkelblau, director of the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning and past president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor.

In the course of his work touting the effectiveness of humor and playfulness in the workplace, Dunkelblau has heard some good pranks. He offers this one as the gold standard:

"A community service organization had a new caseworker starting, and they gave her a fake case and name and said, 'Just check with the other staff to find out about it,' " Dunkelblau says. "Each person she asked about this case would say, 'Oh gosh, again? It happened again?' And that's all they would say. They'd say, 'Talk to somebody else.' They even had the local police liaison involved. They had her call him, and she said, 'No one will tell me what's going on.' And he said, 'It has to do with alien abduction, but you can't tell anybody about this.' And they had her going the whole day.

"It's a great example of how something incredible became more and more believable as it evolved."

It's a riff on the wild-goose chase. Tried and true.

For links to three amusing office pranks on YouTube, visit www.washingtonpost.com/source.

Twenty-one years ago, Joey Skaggs punked The Washington Post. He sent fake press releases alerting major media outlets to a 24-hour surveillance team called the Fat Squad, whose commandos-for-hire hounded dieters. The Post and others reported on it, then ran follow-ups to admit that they'd been victims of a hoax. Skaggs said he did it to call attention to the gullibility of the media and the public.

"I'm trying to raise the level of consciousness pertaining to pranks," says Skaggs, who's been at it for over 40 years. "It is a fine art that incorporates many aspects of talents: writing to acting to directing to doing videography to doing a fake commercial."

His new Web site, the Art of the Prank (www.pranks.com), launches today. Composed in blog form, the site is a one-stop shop for prank recipes, news, forums and information on hoaxes, hacking and "culture jamming" (manipulating the media to make a point). Although, who knows with this guy; maybe he's pranking us again. We got an advance look at the site, but by today he could've changed it to a page that says, "Forget the Post. Read the Times."

Sir John Hargrave, the King of Dot-Comedy who reigns over the Web site Zug, recommends aiming to upset the power structure. "Like the Marx Brothers going

into a high-society ball or Borat going into that genteel Southern dinner with a bag of his feces, we love seeing the big guy go down, and it gives us a sense of the little guy winning," he says.

Posing as a 9-year-old, Hargrave sent letters to every U.S. senator asking them for their favorite joke. He posted the responses on Zug. A precious response came from former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum: "Although a favorite joke doesn't immediately come to mind, I do enjoy laughing."

Adds Hargrave: "It also helps if the target does not have a sense of humor."

He allowed the public to vote for the funniest and "unfunniest" senators. The funniest? Maine's Olympia Snowe (who responded to Hargrave's inquiry with a joke about a politician at the pearly gates). The unfunniest? New York's Hillary Rodham Clinton (who didn't respond at all).

There's a certain voyeuristic adrenaline -- an exciting pulse of sympathy or pity -- that kicks in when you watch or listen to a great prank being pulled, says Johnny Brennan, formerly one half of the Jerky Boys comedy duo, whose prank-call CDs topped Billboard charts in the early '90s.

"When I was young, I always did these characters and voices," Brennan says. "Originally, I was just getting it down on tape. But now people can sit back [with a CD] and say, 'I feel bad for that guy. Johnny really gave him a ribbing.' "

You can listen to prank calls at www.thejerkyboys.com, but be prepared for some salty language unsuitable for impressionable youngsters. Brennan's newest CD, "Sol's Rusty Trombone," was released last month and has 98 tracks of prank calls, ring tones and voice-mail messages.

Brennan advises the intrepid prank caller to strive for originality and spontaneity. Settle into a voice or a character before making a call, and commit to improvisation.

"Just get into it," he says. "Sometimes it's great to do family members. Build a character. I have many, many characters. There's no limit really. Irish, Indian. Do it all."

In the 1800s, students would fire musket balls through their professors' windows, says Neil Steinberg, author of "If at All Possible, Involve a Cow: The Book of College Pranks." Needless to say, that kind of thing would not be written off today as the horseplay of restless collegians. Steinberg says today's pranks need to be subversive and clever. Case in point: the Phantom Event, a prototypical college prank designed to work off a campus's flier epidemic.

How to do it? Put up signs for an event or club that doesn't exist but that would stick out and get people riled up enough to protest or show up at a certain time and place.

"Think of some sort of excess in things that are being advertised -- maybe it's the most touchy-feely Transcendental Meditation event of all time," Steinberg says. The key is to "give something gravitas. Imply there's a lot of people doing it," he says.

Steinberg documents a true-life example in the book: In 1936, when another world war seemed inevitable, Princeton University students created the illusion of a Veterans of Future Wars organization, which demanded military bonuses in advance of one's service. Its logic: Why not get the money while we're young and alive (and in a Depression)? The movement spread to hundreds of campuses across the country and rankled the ranks of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The beauty of it? It was a prank and a peace movement.