Humor in Exams

Ok, hold on, time out. Professor, I can’t do this exam. Come on!

This is a course in heat transfer – and look at the problem you wrote! “You run a zoo...you’ve designed a flamingo-sized hamster ball that can roam the park...the main problem is that flamingos are known for their stink”

What’s wrong?

Ok, sure, but - that’s just set up for the problem! What’s the problem really asking?

Well, the ball has several layers to make it structurally sound and stink-free...

You can’t let the flamingo overheat...

the layers have certain thermal conductivities-

Oh, I get it! It’s just conduction through a composite sphere!

Right!

Why make the problem so ridiculous?

It’s partly a matter of assessment!


sciencetheworld.com
We want to determine if you know and can apply concepts, right?
So let’s have a problem off the beaten track, that requires you to recognize similar concepts and apply them to solve.
So instead of your standard composite wall or pipe, we have a flamingo in a ball.

And the humorous approach?
Well, some students get stressed during exams, and the test doesn’t reflect how well students know the material – just how well students take exams!
So let’s try adding a little humor to the exam problem. Nothing that overwhelms the problem, but something that interjects a controlled distraction that disrupts a student’s stress.

And studies have suggested that students do feel that humor helps reduce their anxiety on exams.
On the other hand, it doesn’t work for everyone – in particular, it might be less effective for graduate students.
And the data is less sure that students definitely perform better on the test.

So professors need to be careful with how they present and implement humor on exams –
But they shouldn’t insist on a dry, serious approach, either!

Now, get back to work.
And if you didn’t like this one, I’ve got a great exam problem about rubber chickens and conveyor belts!