

A stylized tree with a thick brown trunk and a dense canopy of green and yellow leaves. The tree is centered in the background of the slide.

The National Museum of Language

A Virtual, Movable, and Outreach Museum

Since 1997

What Makes People Laugh?

This presentation was given on September 13,
2025 as part of the Prince George's County
Memorial Library system's
Welcoming Week



First a little context for our contest:

We have an exhibit on the World's Oldest Known Joke Book

- Called the *Philogelos* – a collection of jokes in ancient Greek
- Dates from the 4th century CE
- Sometimes jokes still seem funny – sometimes they don't



Here's an example from the Philogelos:

Joke 1 (The Lamp)

1

ΑΜ Σχολαστικὸς ἀργυροκόπῳ ἐπέταξε λύχνον ποιῆσαι. τοῦ δὲ ἐξετάσαντος πηλίκον ποιήσῃ, ἀπεκρίνατο· Ὡς πρὸς ὀκτὼ ἀνθρώπους.

An idiot asks a silversmith to make him a lamp. ‘How big do you want me to make it?’ the silversmith asks.

‘Big enough for eight people to see by.’



*And here it is presented
as a comic strip:*



One joke documented in the Philogelos is incomplete, though.

An idiot was trying to catch a mouse that had been nibbling through his books, so he sat still all night with a piece of meat in his mouth.

-Translation by Dan Crompton



Here is a comic strip of the incomplete joke with only the final part missing.



2





CHILDGET 9/8/87

THOSE
⚡💩☀️☁️★
MICE HAVE BEEN
EATING MY
BOOKS AT
NIGHT AGAIN!

3



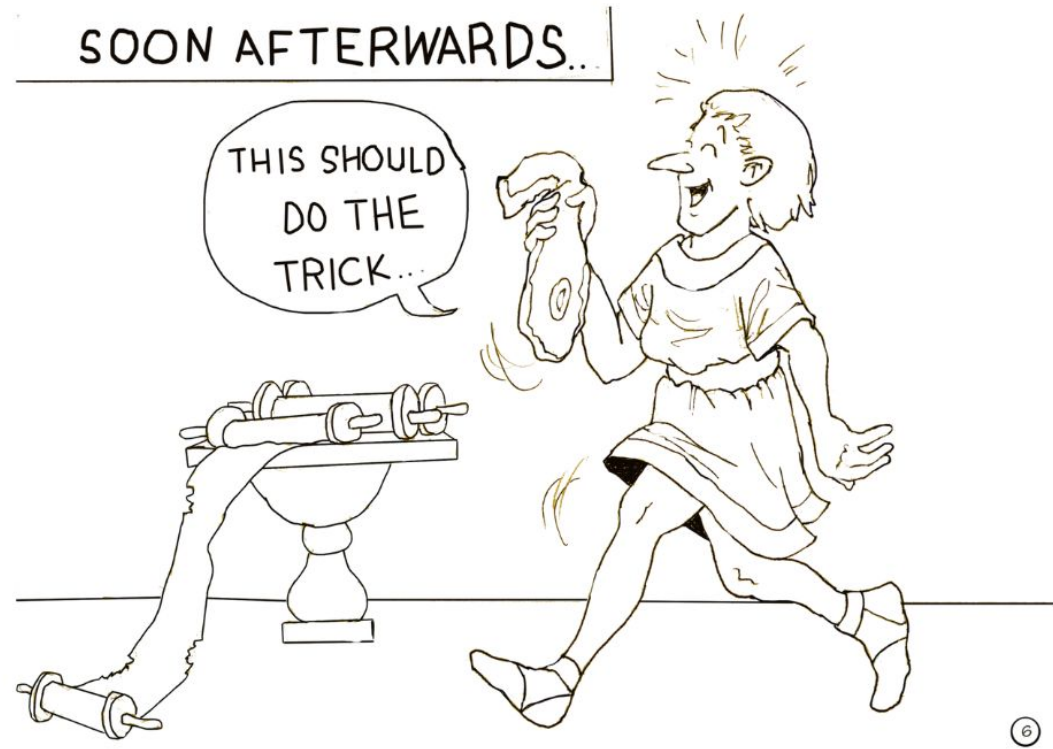
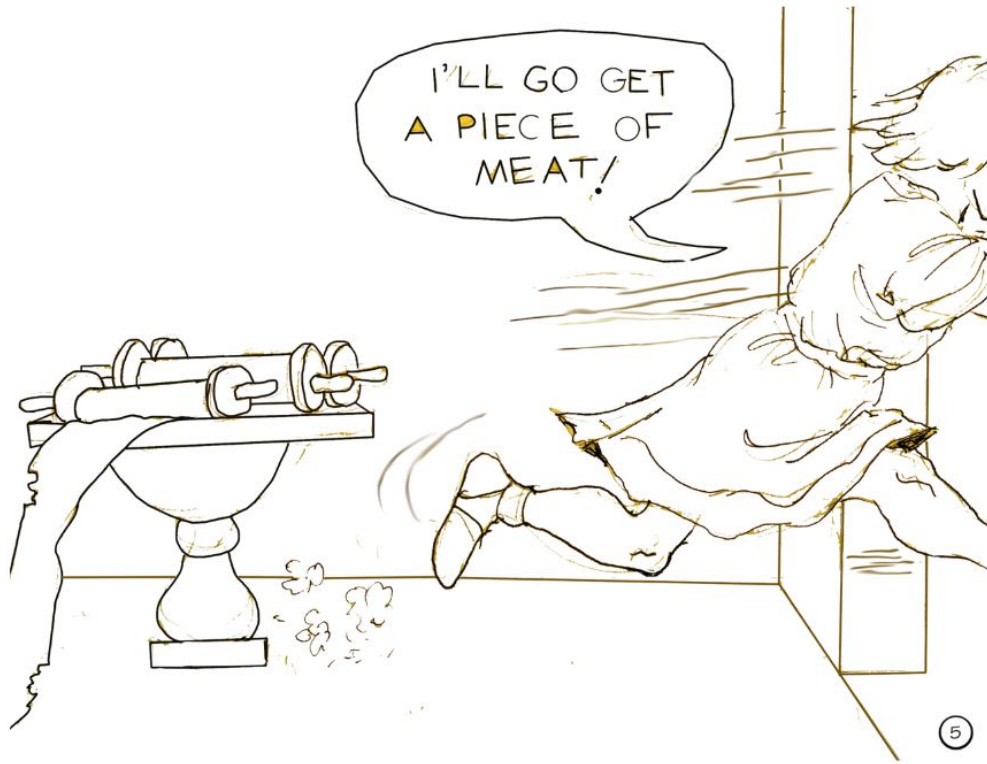
I'LL HAVE TO THINK
OF A WAY TO
CATCH THEM...

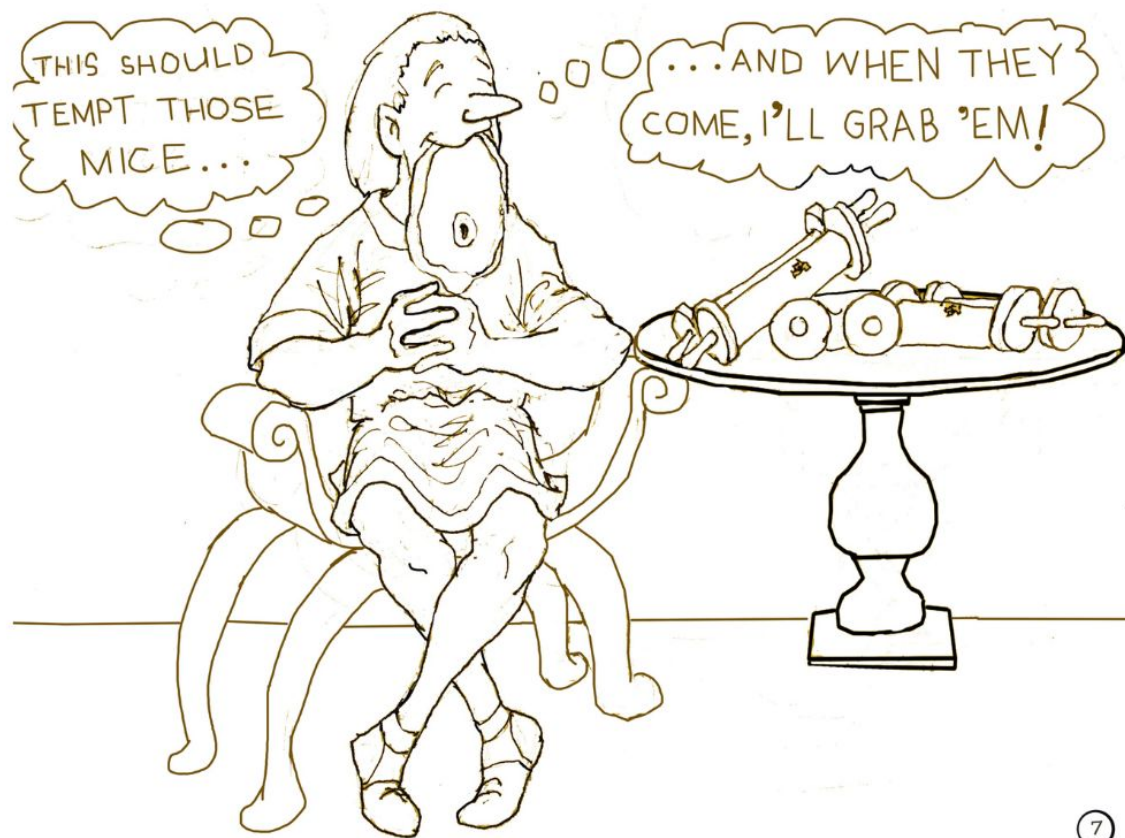
OH, I KNOW WHAT TO DO!



4







7

?

**What comes
next?**



How could this joke have ended?



National Museum of Language Contest: Finish the Joke!

Here's a challenge for you – since the Philogelos joke #8 is incomplete, the National Museum of Language invites you to finish the joke. Tell us how YOU think this joke would have ended. We will look at all the entries and select what we think is the best ending for the joke. We will publish a completed version of the joke in cartoon form on the NML website and credit you for the ending.



NML Joke Contest Rules

- 1) Joke endings must be submitted by September 27, 2025.
- 2) Send your entries to the NML: info@languageuseum.org, with the subject heading "Phil Joke 8 ending."
- 3) Include the name under which you want to be credited (first name only, first and last name, nickname) your city and state.
- 4) You may write your ending either as a prose paragraph (like the opening paragraph for this contest), or you may write it as cartoon dialogue that describes the action and dialogue panel by panel. Start with Panel 8. By the way, the character's name is Abderitēs.
- 5) Since the joke dates back to around the late 4th century CE, your ending gag should NOT include anything that would not have been known about at that time. The one exception to this is that you may use modern English instead of ancient Greek. No references to stuff like spring-triggered mousetraps, guns, drones, lasers, etc. If you are not sure if something would be allowable, send your question to info@languageuseum.org with the subject heading "Phil Joke 8 ending question," and we'll tell you if your idea is usable.



Resources for Additional Study

- IMDb listing of top 10 comedians/ comedic writers, including: George Carlin, Larry David, Ben Stiller, Jim Carrey, Steve Martin. <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls005780306/>
- See Jerry Seinfeld's 5-step comedy writing process for advice on how to write jokes and comic sketches.
<https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-nonfiction/jerry-seinfelds-5-step-comedy-writing-process>. Also see his book, *Sein Language*.
- Book recommended on Reddit for how to write jokes: Adam Bloom, *Finding Your Comic Genius*.
https://www.reddit.com/r/Standup/comments/1ezi4gz/best_joke_writers_to_study/
- Google search results for "Best comedy writers of all time":
https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&sca_esv=5270bdc6b1684f18&q=Best+comedy+writers+of+all+time&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwja5_jB0o2PAxWfKVkFHc7bGBkQ1QJ6BAhOEAE&biw=1536&bih=711&dpr=1.25
Notable names for joke-writing & joke-telling on this list: Steve Martin, Stephen Fry, Tina Fey, Mel Brooks, Joan Rivers, Jerry Seinfeld, Garrison Keillor, John Cleese, George Carlin.



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