

Fundamentals of Humor

Putting On Your Comedy Goggles
-workbook-

Our Philosophy of Comedy

Everyone who shows up at a comedy show wants to laugh. Your job is to bridge the gap between your ideas and the audience member's expectations. Instead of compromising your artistic sensibilities, you need to find a way to connect with the audience. You can make them laugh, and you can make them want to see understand your point of view.

Write smart, be specific and trust that the audience wants to know what the world looks like through your eyes. The more you create, the better you'll understand the process of writing solid material, and the easier and more quickly you'll do it.

Listen to the audience. For every one comedian that complains that the audience was bad, there are 20 comics who could have connected and gotten big laughs in the same situation.

How is that an experienced comedian can be funny in almost every situation? Because he learned to trust himself, relax, let his performance skills take over and just let the jokes come out naturally.

What follows is a brief introduction to concepts you'll be exploring throughout these workbooks.

The Fundamentals of Being Funny

There are five important fundamentals of comedy that apply to all forms of comedy, whether it's stand-up, improv, sketch, etc. No matter what style of humor you want to write, grasping these concepts is essential. Most comedians spend years learning how to get the most out of their material. You'll find that being able to recognize and implement these fundamentals early will speed up your progress towards your funniest, no matter what your goals in comedy might be.

--A Word About the Exercises and Examples--

Throughout these workbook I'll do a few examples for each topic. Some of the examples will refer to a former student named "Kevin". He's now a professional comedian.

Do the exercises in your comedy notebook. Do them multiple times. If you get writer's block, return to the exercises.

Very often I'll ask you to make a list of 10 things. I strongly encourage you to finish all 10. Not only is it just good to finish what you start, but you'll also find that by forcing yourself to make it to ten that some of your favorite ideas will show up on that 9th and 10th line.

Be specific! No one likes traffic. No one likes paying taxes. But what is it specifically that you don't like? The example from the student is "nervous drivers". That's much more interesting than just boring old traffic.

#1 - Comedy comes from you.

Comedians get on stage because they have something to say. They feel passionate about it, and their strong attitude is reflected in their choice of material.

The audience doesn't go to a club to hear old ideas. They know that Jehovah's Witnesses are annoying when they knock on your door. What they don't hear often is what it feels like to be that Witness begrudgingly knocking on your door.

That doesn't mean every topic has to be unique and unexplored. Lots of comics talk about relationships. What's interesting though is our perspective on relationships (or any other topic) and what caused you to come to that conclusion.

Exercise - Identify 10 interesting traits about yourself. Find five things that the audience probably doesn't know about, commonly misunderstands or should want to know about you.

Examples: You're a Jehovah's Witness. You've jumped out of an airplane. You're a Big Brother. You're a recovering cocaine addict.

Funny Stories Exercise, Part 1* - Write out one of your favorite funny stories that involves you. Be specific. Example: One of our students, Kevin, told two stories. The first one involved a drunk stranger that he didn't prevent from just walking into his apartment. (The second story is in the next workbook.)

Funny Stories Exercise, Part 2* - Read through the story, stop at every event and write out what your action, or in some cases inaction, says about your personality.

Example: Kevin's story showed how passive he can be.

*Keep what you've written from this exercise because you'll return to it at the end of the *Find Your Voice* workbook.

There will be more about creating comedy from your life and personality. There will be more about this in the *Find Your Voice* and *Building Improv Scenes from the Ground Up* workbooks.

#2 - You feel strongly about the subject.

Being truthful in comedy does not mean that you can only say factual statements. It's more important to be truthful in your point of view. Louis C.K. doesn't actually hate his kids. The frustrations of parenting are real though. If the audience trusts you, they will like you more, and that means bigger laughs.

One of the best ways to find out your point-of-view is to figure out what it isn't.

Who Aren't You?

Sometimes a lot of comedy comes from what you aren't. "I'm no good with girls." "I never finished college." "I can't figure out my DVD player." All of these have been successful premises.

Exercise - Write down 10 things you aren't, don't do, aren't good at, etc.

Examples: I'm not skinny. I don't watch TV. I can't drive very well. I have horrible taste in clothes.

--Advice from the Green Room--

For years I heard comics joke about how fun, or tragic, it was to go drinking. Since I don't drink, I thought it would be interesting to write about that from the other perspective:

"I don't drink, but all of my friends do, so that makes me designated driver. Five drunks and me driving around at two in the morning looking for a Taco Bell. They're so drunk they're trying to order a Grilled Stuffed Buffalo."

Joke writing and improv comedy is always better (and easier) when it starts with a grain of truth. Find out more about these workbooks: *Joke Writing 101*, *Improvising Comic Characters*, *Improv Scenes From The Ground Up*.

#3 - It's your opinion. Don't worry about what anybody else thinks.

There's no room in comedy for weak emotions. You either love something or you hate it. The Rolling Stones are either rock n' roll gods sent down from Mt. Olympus or they're the most overrated hacks that were in

the right place at the right time. In truth, you don't have to personally have such fiery feelings, but audiences respond to and recognize strong emotional choices.

Exercise - Write a list of 10 things that you hate that a lot of people love.

Examples: romantic comedies, Christmas, graduating high school

Exercise - Write a list of 10 things that you love that a lot of people hate.

Examples: sitting in traffic, Norwegian death metal, being alone

The choices you make when brainstorming and developing ideas are directly related to how you see the world and what you pay attention to. You'll find more on these topics in the workbooks: *Brainstorming For Material*, *Find Your Voice* and *Writing Comic Characters*.

#4 - Words matter.

Comedy is like poetry. The rhythm and choice of words can mean the difference between huge laughs and awkward silence. Jerry Seinfeld has said that he would spend hours trying to turn a punchline from seven words into five words just to get the biggest laughs possible.

If a word is not absolutely necessary in order for the audience to get the joke, then it should be removed. Typically, the fewer the words, the stronger the punchline.

Not only can excess words mess up the rhythm of a joke, but they can just confuse the audience too. A comedian I know was running a joke by me. He said, "I was at the unemployment office, and there was a guy complaining loudly about the president. And I just think some people just need to shut up about politics..."

The comic brought up the unemployment office at the beginning of the joke, but then the joke was about political opinions. Why did we need to know that there was an unemployment office involved? If it's not necessary for the punchline, take it out.

When you've got material, you'll have something to examine carefully to see if you need to trim words or rearrange for better effect. In the meantime, it's important to realize much info you can convey in a small amount of words.

You can find more info about creating stronger material in the *Joke Writing 101* workbook.

#5 - Good comedy takes time, work and commitment.

If you treat comedy like a second job, then one day it could be your only job.

--Advice from the Green Room--

If you weren't passionate about comedy, you probably wouldn't be reading this. One of the most frustrating things about comedy is that it takes time to master the craft. It's hard for all of us to be patient about the pace of something when we're passionate about it. Julie Powers of Powers Management Group, who has seen hundreds if not thousands of developing comedians, used to say, "*A sustainable career in comedy requires experience over time. If a cake recipe calls for 45 minutes in a 350° oven, you won't get the desired result if you put it in the oven for 15 minutes at 800°.*"

Write smart, be specific and trust that the audience wants to know what the world looks like through your eyes. The more you create, the better you'll understand the process of writing solid material. Listen to the audience. For every one comedian that complains that the audience was bad, there are 20 comics who could have connected and gotten big laughs in the same situation.

Exercise - Notebook

Buy a notebook. Keep it with you at all times. Write down every odd thought or observation that you notice.

“Morning Pages”

Julie Cameron is famous for her idea from her book *The Artist’s Way* which stated that most artists need to skim the leaves off their creative pool every morning. If you just free write for three pages or 30 minutes, then you’ll get all the normal chatter out of your head so you can focus on your art. Just write. Don’t stop. If you stop, write “KEEP WRITING” and just put your thoughts down on paper. Don’t worry about grammar, spelling or even making sense. Don’t even worry about writing them just in the morning. But complete them in one sitting. Otherwise you won’t get to the “ah ha” moment in the middle of that third page when you suddenly want to continue writing beyond three pages.

Example: “Ugh I don’t feel like writing today. I’ve got so much to do. Laundry. I forgot to do laundry. And then I need to go to the store and get toilet paper and coffee....KEEP WRITING. I always feel uncomfortable when I buy toilet paper. Hey I could maybe write a bit about that. [etc.]”

Exercise - Do your “morning pages” every day for one week. That’s 21 pages total. At the end, if you find that they just don’t work with your personality, then at least you tried one of the most popular writing exercises that lots of people swear by.

Exercise - Find the closest comedy open mic and go watch a show. If you’ve got a comedy club in town, call it and ask. Or go online and try a good search for either “[the closest large town] + comedian] and you’ll find some comedian in your area who can probably point you in the right direction. If that fails, contact me at adam@undergroundcomedyschool.com and I’ll see if I can help.

Exercise - Watch as much stand-up comedy as you can. Don’t just watch the legends. Check out websites like www.rooftopcomedy.com where you can see hundreds of comedians who are still just working their way up through the ranks, just like you’ll soon be doing.

After you’ve got a few minutes of material, then you’ll be ready to start checking out some of these ideas and more in the following workbooks: *The Business of Comedy*, *Your First Five Minutes* and *Perform Like a Pro*.

Finding Your Voice

Stand Up, Stand Out

-workbook-

Who are you? Who aren't you?

You have a unique resource. No one else has ever examined the world with your eyes. You'll find material from your life using an interview process. You'll never have to wonder what to write about because you've got a library of potential material.

Why start here?

The most frequently asked question I get is "Can you teach someone to be funny?" This is usually asked with skepticism. After years of teaching and dealing with aspiring amateur comedians, the answer is that someone can learn to be funnier. I can't write the jokes for you. This workbook will try to get you as close to joke ideas as possible.

Most amateur comics make many of the same mistakes early on. They are trying to be a comedian instead of just trying to be funny. What's the difference? A comedian tells you what he thinks is funny. He doesn't ask your permission.

In this workbook you will do a few exercises that will help you build a solid foundation for your comedy that is based on your point-of-view. Some of the exercises might be more helpful to you than others, but hopefully you'll finish this workbook with an idea of what motivates you to see the world as you do. No matter what style of joke you do, the jokes come from inside. We'll take an inventory of what is going on inside of that brain of yours.

I encourage you not to worry about the final product. Don't worry about the audience. Don't worry about your stage persona. Be in the moment. Right now. Don't edit yourself. We haven't started jokes yet. Let's just get some information on that blank page.

--Advice from the Green Room--

The hardest part of getting into stand-up comedy is having to deal with the management. I don't mean some industry insider. I mean you.

On some level it would be much easier if you got into comedy and had never seen a famous stand-up. If the only comedians you had seen were just some local guys trying to turn being funny into an art form, then you wouldn't compare yourself to someone like Zack Galifianakis or Dave Chappelle, comics who worked on being funny for years before being known on a national level.

Zack and Dave both started out the same as you, wondering what to talk about. You already have something in common. You want to make people laugh.

We're not writing jokes. We're just having a conversation. You'll get the most out of these exercises if you don't try to be clever and fabricate stuff. There will be plenty of time to do that later.

Exercise - Write a list of 10 things that annoy you.

Examples:

- nervous drivers
- people that text during a movie
- slow internet connections
- people that don't have cell phones
- waiting until the last minute to start doing my taxes

Exercise - Write a list of 10 things that you hate.

Examples:

politicians who follow instead of lead

James Cameron movies
spilling coffee all over my car while driving
easy listening music
neighborhood dogs that never stop barking

Exercise - Write a list of 10 things that scare you.

Examples:

a sudden painful death
being stuck in my car under a busy rush hour overpass
being wrongly convicted of a crime
a collapse of the US currency
angry drunks

Exercise - Write a list of 10 things that you would happily rearrange your schedule to do.

Examples:

a trip to the museum with my girlfriend
playing Call of Duty online
to go hiking when the ground is dry
to see U2 play live
cooking Indian food

Immediately upon reading Kevin's examples I have some idea who he is and what motivates, annoys and scares him. He's got a girlfriend, a bit of a gamer, a U2 fan, who likes art and being outside sometimes. He's doesn't like things that are out of his control.

When relating to an audience, it's important for material to be based in reality. That's doesn't mean you can't be weird or unusual on stage. It means that the audience wants to get the joke. They want to laugh at your material. They may not know what it's like to play World of Warcraft, but they do know what it's like to be a big nerd about whatever it is that they are passionate about whether it's bass fishing, pro football or role playing games.

What's Your Area of Expertise?

Just because CNN doesn't call you up to ask your advice of a tough issue, that doesn't mean you're not an expert at things. For this next exercise, "expert" just means something that you know more about or can do better than the average person on the street. You might be an expert on indie bands in the Columbus, OH area. You might be an expert at talking your way out of speeding tickets. Or you might just be an expert at wasting time.

Exercise - Finding Your Expertise

Write a list of ten areas of expertise. Remember that this not a list of what you want to do. This is a list of what you can currently do well or what you know a lot about right now.

Examples:

how to get the most out of a juicer
Law and Order episodes
killing time on Facebook
knowing the best Indian restaurants in town
growing plants indoors during the winter

Assumptions About Your Appearance

When we meet someone for the very first time we naturally make assumptions about the person. Those assumptions can be spot on or they could be completely incorrect. In stand-up these assumptions can help or

hurt your performance.

If you're a 300-lb guy with tattoos and dreadlocks, the audience is naturally going to assume anything along from the spectrum of biker, tattoo artist, musician, etc. Are they correct? It may turn out that you're really an accountant.

Whether you decide to comment on your appearance is an artistic decision you will make. That's not the point here. It's important to put yourself in the audience and at least be aware of how you could be perceived by the way you walk on stage.

Appearance Exercise Part 1- List 10 correct assumptions that people could (or do) make about you when they meet you for the first time.

Examples:

My rock band T-shirts gives people the impression that I like to go to concerts.
I'm a young guy (21) so people assume that I might be in college.
I'm thin and I wear glasses so people assume I'm a bit of a nerd.
I am socially pretty awkward.

Appearance Exercise Part 2- List 10 incorrect assumptions that people could (or do) make about you when they meet you for the first time.

Examples:

I like science fiction.
I don't watch sports.
I am arrogant (for being quiet).
I can't get a date.

Your Appearance Responses Exercise - Go through both appearance exercises Part 1 and 2 and justify why those people are either correct or incorrect in their assessment of you.

Examples:

-Yes, I like to go to concerts because there's nothing like seeing a band live. These bands aren't going to be around forever, and I don't want to regret missing my favorite ones.
-No, I don't like science fiction because I just can't buy into it. The aliens always seem to look suspiciously like a human in a costume or heavy makeup. (See the joke forming already?)

By this point you have gathered specific information about the kind of person you are and what motivates you. Almost everything on your list is going to be a choice you've made. The choices you make say things about who you are.

Exercise - Who I Am? Write 10 sentences that begin with: "I'm the kind of person who..."

Kevin's Examples:

"I'm the kind of person who's taking it easy."
"I'm the kind of guy that's not striving (at the moment) to be the CEO of a company."
"I'm the kind of person who doesn't put a lot of thought into my appearance."

Continued from Fundamentals of Humor workbook

The final exercise in the *Fundamentals of Humor* workbook asked you to remember a funny story and see what that story said about you as a person. Now that you've spent more time in this workbook looking at who you are, continue the exercise by examining another story.

Exercise - Find your notes from when you did the Funny Stories Exercise. If you can't, no sweat. Just do the exercise again, which is right here.

Funny Stories Exercise, Part 1 - Write out one of your favorite funny stories that involves you. Be specific.

Example:

Kevin told two stories. The first one involved a drunk stranger that he didn't prevent from just walking into his apartment. (The second story is below.)

Funny Stories Exercise, Part 2 - Read through the story, stop at every event and write out what your action, or in some cases inaction, says about your personality.

Example: Kevin's story showed how passive he can be.

Exercise - Repeat both Funny Stories exercises again for another funny story.

Example:

Kevin's other story was about working briefly as car salesman. He didn't want to be a salesman or to get rejected by customers, so he just sat in cars and listened to the radio.

Exercise - Examine both stories to see if there are similarities in how you responded in the situations.

Example: In both cases he avoided taking action.

Exercise - Write what your stories say about you?

Examples:

In the student's example, he avoided conflict and uncomfortable situations. He's not a natural born leader. Maybe you find that your stories showed: "I get in trouble a lot. I'm the one people always come to with problems."

Maybe in six months Kevin will decide to start pumping iron and striving to head a Fortune 500 company. When he does, that will shape the way he views everything from a bad economy, becoming an uncle for the first time, or just something as simple as walking down the cereal aisle. But not now. That's not who he is.

Brainstorming to Find Jokes

Developing Comedy Material From Thin Air

-workbook-

One of the most important things to keep in mind when writing is that you need to produce a LOT of material in order to find a little bit of usable jokes. For every 10 attempts, one will hopefully be funny enough to make it into your act. Don't get discouraged. It's part of the process.

Early on your development you'll run across ideas for jokes in all kinds of ways. They can come up spontaneously in a conversation, by ranting while pacing in a circle by yourself at 4:00 am, by bouncing the idea

back and forth with another comedian, by sitting and observing the world around you, etc.

Other ways involve sitting down with a blank page and pouring ideas into it. This could be looking at newspaper and trying to think of something funny or it could be a more organic process: brainstorming. With brainstorming you're just trying to get information on the page not only so you have a lot to work, but also so that you don't make the common mistake of thinking that you've exhausted the topic. There's no such thing as a topic that is exhausted, but there are such things as lazy comics.

No matter how the ideas come to you, write them down in your notebook. Write everything down and don't get rid of it. Seven years from now, with experience, you'll look back and be able to fix some of your jokes that you never thought would make the cut.

--Advice from the Green Room--

After more than a decade in stand-up I still return to writing exercises. I still collect jokes in every way that I can, but I have found exercises that work well to help me fill up that blank page, especially on days where I want to write but am having a tough time getting into the groove of things.

Exercise - Single Column Brainstorming

Choose a topic. List as many things as you can that is related to the topic. Write for 5 minutes. Don't stop writing. The list can include details, people related to the topic, historical events, songs, etc. Just keep writing. And don't judge the list.

Example: Kevin chose camping.

fire
firewood
hunting for firewood
starting the fire
cavemen
the invention of fire
cooking with fire
sitting around the fire
roasting marshmallows
the marshmallow falling into the campfire
fiery marshmallows are like napalm
smoke in your eyes
fire going out during the night
extinguishing the fire
"We Didn't Start the Fire" (song)
park rangers
forest fires
Smokey the Bear
"Only you can prevent forest fires."
setting up a tent
failing to set up a tent
sleeping under the stars
bugs
wild animals
bug spray

Notice how much info he got onto the page simply by starting with the campfire and exploring that part of the campsite. That was before he moved on to anything beyond fire related stuff.

At this point, if Kevin wants to explore the topic of camping, he has 25 topics to consider. Knowing that Kevin is a gamer who is scared of death and wants things to be a certain way, we might be able to imagine how bad of a caveman Kevin would have been or how he would be paranoid about bugs and wild animals in a camping situation.

How would you relate and/or interact with some of the things on your list?

Exercise - Mind Mapping

Now try another free flowing brainstorming technique. This exercise takes up quite a bit of space on a page and can get messy. Write a topic in the top left of your page. Circle it. Below it, write down the first 10 things that come to mind when you think of that topic, just like in the “campfire” example.

Next, choose one of the words from your list of 10 things. Circle it. Start a new column. Without worrying about your original topic, write at least 10 things/phrases that come to mind about your new topic. Keep doing this until you fill up the page(s) or reach about 10 topics.

Example: Kevin chose “video games” as his topic. I'll use (____) to distinguish the topic Kevin chose for his next list.

Video games: violent, controllers, consoles, (difficulty levels), online play, time consuming, distracts from homework, fun, expensive.

Difficulty levels: easy, normal, difficult, casual players, veteran gamers, (challenging), games last longer, learning curve, unplayable.

Challenging: (relationships), Rubik's Cube, calculus, auto repair, boot camp, finding a gift for dad, AT&T customer service, finding Osama bin Laden, astronomy, finding my keys.

Relationships: dining out, watching movies, (dating), breaking up, gifts, Valentine's Day, first kiss, sex, marriage, pregnancy.

Exercise - Now start with the original topic and just talk/write your way through the list, moving from topic to topic. There are no real rules with this. It's okay to try to be funny as you work through the lists.

Example:

I play a lot of video games which tells you that I'm either the CEO of a major financial institution or a C-average geek. I'm mysterious! What's worse is that I'm not even playing on the hardest difficulty level. I'm barely surviving college AND the level 7 wave of zombie Nazis.

But that's one of the things I like about games. You can adjust the difficulty level. You can make it less challenging. I wish you could do that with relationships.

Sometimes when I'm in a relationship I wish I could turn down the difficulty level during the dating process. Finally dating on the Easy level. That way instead of a girl asking, “Where do you work?” she'll ask, “Aren't sharks scary?”

Maybe not a gut buster, but there is something there to develop.

Mike Bent's “Something from Nothing” Exercise

Comedian/magician Mike Bent wrote a comedy writing book that I recommend buying. It's called “The Everything Guide to Writing Comedy” (Adams Media 2009). It covers all kinds of comedy writing.

My favorite exercise in his book is called "Something From Nothing". It's an excellent exercise for generating material from scratch. [Draw two columns on a page.] In Column A write 30-40 words, places, topics. Anything from vampires, Scotland, the Moon landing, or drag racing. Anything will work. Do the same in Column B.

Mike encourages you to take any word from Column A and compare it to a word from Column B. Just start combing the ideas and see where your mind goes. Don't edit yourself. You can do that later.

Mike Bent's example from "The Everything Guide to Comedy Writing":

Dog paired with Secret Recipe

Cans of pet food have flavor names like "Hearty Stew" and "Seafood Fiesta Select." Do people test them? Is there someone whose job it is to taste test dog food? Is there a temperamental master chef behind these creations? Dogs and cats eat weird stuff on their own. They even eat out of the garbage and drink out of the toilet bowl. Why not give the foods names that reflect that? Names like "Rancid Month-Old Chinese-Food Leftovers Medley", "Coffee Grounds and Q-Tips Blend", "I Can't Believe It's Not Poop" and "Diaper Surprise!" (page 23)

--Advice from the Green Room--

There are no bad ideas (at first anyway). When you are brainstorming joke ideas, don't censor yourself. Write down everything that comes to mind, even if you think it's crap. If you edit as you go, you block the really good ideas from coming.

If you're having trouble censoring yourself while brainstorming, set a timer for, say, two minutes. Then write everything you can think of in those two minutes related to your topic--non-stop. Now do it for three minutes, then four, and so on. Eventually you will get into a free-flow mindset where you don't even think about how much time you are writing. That's where the good ideas are.

Some comics use an audio recorder and just riff on a topic verbally. If you're more of a talker than a writer, go for it.

Getting Specific

Einstein said, "God is in the details." He could have been a stand-up comic. The more you delve into a topic, the more facets you find. And there may be funny in those facets.

Exercise - Go Deep. Find a subject and get as detailed about it as you can.

Example: What's in your refrigerator?

Milk.

2% milk.

A jug of 2% milk.

A gallon jug of 2% milk.

A gallon jug of 2% milk that is almost empty.

A gallon jug of 2% milk that is almost empty that my roommate bought.

A gallon jug of 2% milk that is almost empty that my roommate bought that I used on cereal this morning.

A gallon jug of 2% milk that is almost empty that my roommate bought that I used on Captain Crunch this morning.

A gallon jug of 2% milk that is almost empty that my roommate bought that I used on Captain Crunch this morning that wasn't mine to drink.

Remember, words matter; there is a danger of getting too specific. Only include details that make the joke work. Which joke is funnier?

I've been living with my buddy for 6 months now .We've known each other since high school. I haven't bought one gallon of 2% milk to put on my Captain Crunch the whole time. I just trick my roommate into buying it. I just steal his 2% milk and fill it up with water. He's not a smart guy. He's so dumb he thinks milk gets watery when it goes bad, so he keeps buying new gallons of 2% milk. (Pointing at himself.) Genius.

or

I've been living with my buddy for 6 months now. I haven't bought one gallon of milk the whole time. I just steal his and fill it up with water. He's so dumb he thinks milk gets watery when it goes bad, so he keeps buying new gallons. (Pointing at himself.) Genius.

If your joke is really about stealing your roommate's milk, we don't need to know it's 2%. Take a Dragnet approach to joke writing. "Just the facts, ma'am."

With this 2% milk example we've actually taken the product of a brainstorming exercise and seen it evolve into joke writing. You'll see more of this in the *Joke Writing 101* workbook.

Just remember, brainstorming isn't something you have to do locked in a room for hours a day. (That comes later when you're turning your ideas into jokes.) It's just a way to get the raw stuff to turn in to delicious stage material. Bon appétit!

Forming the Jokes

Generating Killer Punchlines

-workbook-

A stand-up comedian has to be funny at 8:47 pm on a Wednesday night, whether he's happy or in good health. Having solid jokes to rely upon can make that task much easier. But joke writing is a skill that requires work and a lot of trial and error. Out of every 10 jokes you come up with, one of them might be funny enough make a room of strangers burst into laughter. Let's get to it.

--Advice from the Green Room--

I've got a couple dozen notebooks that are filled with humorous ideas, half-baked concepts and just plain crap. Sprinkled amongst those are some comedy gems. While there are some people who just seem to be naturally funny, the truth is that every comic, even the greats, burn through a great deal of mediocre material in order to find the strong bits that will eventually make it into their acts. As a comic gains experience he'll become a more efficient writer, especially once he's really honed in on his voice.

What makes a joke funny?

The surprise.

Before we go any further, let's go over a few very basic definitions of some of the parts of a joke:

Setup: The first part of the joke that should include all the information needed so that the punchline gets a laugh.

Punchline: The climactic part of the joke that surprises the audience when you reveal an unexpected or insightful twist on the setup.

Tagline: Another funny line that plays off of or continues the punchline. There can be multiple taglines.

Example:

There was a guy in the World's Strongest Man competition that was pulling a full size airplane with a rope. [setup] That's awesome...unless that's your flight [punchline]...cuz you're pissed [tagline]...'Damn you, Priceline.com!' [tagline]...'Fifty bucks to England. What could go wrong?' [tagline] No engine. [tagline]

Not all comedic styles are the same. When writing jokes, there are different approaches. As with the brainstorming, the writing process will be a whole lot easier if you approach the idea from as many different angles.

Compare the styles of a late night talk show host like David Letterman to someone like Chris Rock. David Letterman's monologues are a classic example of the setup/punchline model. He starts a joke with a statement of fact (setup), like a headline from the news. Then he provides the twist (punchline). Chris Rock, on the other hand, is doing a longer comedy routines. Both use setups and punchlines, but it's a little easier to see the structure in jokes like Letterman's.

Look at these examples and notice how the first line or two doesn't try to be funny. It's just providing facts or truth.

A lot of folks are still demanding more evidence before they actually consider Iraq a threat. For example, France wants more evidence. And you know I'm thinking, the last time France wanted more evidence they rolled right through Paris with the German flag. - David Letterman

Dick Cheney said he was running again. He said his health was fine, 'I've got a doctor with me 24 hours a day.' Yeah, that's always the sign of a man in good health, isn't it? - David Letterman

Experts say that Iraq may have nuclear weapons. That's bad news - they may have a nuclear bomb. Now the good news is that they have to drop it with a camel. - David Letterman

In each of those three jokes, Letterman's punchlines are pointing out the dumb thing about the information in the setup. Tearing down an idea by pointing out what's weird, scary, hard or stupid is a common angle taken by comedians. We'll go even deeper and explore a similar technique used by comics like Seinfeld, Chris Rock, etc. who do longer routines but use the same tricks.

Assumptions About Topics

Almost every topic is loaded with assumptions that we make as soon as it is introduced. These assumptions are just basic information or stereotypes that have just come up so often that most people think the same thing about them. For example, cats. What do you think when you hear 'cat'?

They always land on their feet.
They sleep all day.
They like to get on the counter.

Assumptions can generally be considered the facts about the topic. In late night monologues, the assumption is the news story from the day that most people will be familiar with. If the topic is gun control, then the assumption will include all the arguments for and against gun control.

Assumptions take a lot of the workload off your shoulders because the audience is unknowingly putting themselves into a position to be surprised. Climate change: we know right away that there are going to be some strong opinions. There are going to be disputes over the facts, over how we should address it, over what the cause is... Forget for a moment what you believe to be true or not true. The public conversation is taking place on the new, in the break rooms, and on the internet.

Find the assumptions and then start playing with them.

A Note About Exaggeration

Remember, strong opinions matter. And when we feel strongly about something, sometimes we go over the top. "I LOVE mint chocolate ice cream. In this unstable economy and with these untrustworthy politicians, ice cream is the ONLY thing I can trust. That's why this Election Day I'm going to write in 'ice cream' for president. Even if it just sits there and melts all over the Oval Office, at least we can say, 'Damn, that was good ice cream!'"

What If?

When looking for joke ideas, constantly ask yourself 'what if?' about everything that comes up. What if ice cream was president? What if everyone worked a job for one year and then was fired? All the job titles are put in a hat and then you just pick one out. CEO of Chase Bank? That's your new job.

Anything is possible. Nothing is too crazy. Asking questions like 'what if?' can open up a topic and really get you inside to examine it like no one else.

Joke Structure

Judy Carter has an excellent explanation of this joke structure in her book "The Comedy Bible" (Fireside 2001). She breaks jokes down the **setup** into three parts: topic, attitude and premise. She breaks down the possible parts of a **punchline** into act outs and mixes.

Topic - What's the joke about? Gun control, for example.

Not much more needed about this one. This is a very broad part of the joke. If a comic is talking about traffic, then the topic is traffic.

Exercise: Write 10 topics. It doesn't get much easier than this. Just write out 10 possible topics of conversation that you might want to talk about. Remember to finish the list of 10, and don't just stop when you've got a few you like.

Attitude - What's your emotional response? Judy Carter recommends starting with attitudes like *weird*, *scary*, *hard* and *stupid* (page 74).

The attitude is like a filter through which you're going to view the topic. Instead of just going with a gut feeling and stopping after your first idea, try to explore the topic by examining it by saying, "the weird thing about" or "the crazy thing about", etc. You never know where the funniest idea is going to be.

Premise - What are you trying to say about your topic? What's your angle?

When you combine your topic with your attitude, then you will have the basis for your premise. With some premises just fake it until you make it, as they say. If you force yourself to search for "the weird thing about college" then you'll find it.

Example: "the [weird] thing about [college] is..."

1. it's where guys do laundry for the first time.
2. banks hand you a credit card as soon as you step out of your car.
3. the nerds finally start feeling cool and the jocks wonder why they aren't as popular.
4. you can go from living with your parents to living in a dorm with a total stranger.
5. you learn how much toothpaste costs.

Exercise - Write five more weird things about college (even if you didn't go you still know about college).

Exercise – Do your own. Choose one of your 10 topics. Then choose an attitude. You can choose one of the ones Judy Carter recommends (weird, scary, hard and dumb) or whatever you want to go with. Just finish the sentence: “The [insert attitude] thing about [your topic] is ...” Do that ten times for at least one attitude and topic.

Funny or not, you are at least clearly expressing a point-of-view that the audience can understand.

--Advice from the Green Room--

A common saying is that comedy is about the truth. As someone who loves weird and abstract comics, I still have to agree. Your premise should usually have some real truth to it. What is truth in this context? Mainly it's just a way for the audience to relate to the joke. The audience wants to be in on the joke. They want to understand it.

If you say, "I'm a robot built in Japan," then the audience might be trying to figure out what you're talking about. Are you trying to be clever? But just something as simple as adding, "Sometimes I feel like..." to the front of that sentence will make it more clear. We all do and think some strange stuff from time to time.

That said, some comics can pull off doing weirder comedy. A lot of times the comic's performance skills convey much of the information needed so that a comic can make the more challenging bits work.

Act Out – Now that you've gotten inside the world of your joke, give us an example of that point-of-view in action. In the previous premise: *The stupid thing about some psychologists is that they try to tell us how we should talk*, an easy act out would just be to pretend to be a psychologist speaking at a conference:

“We should no longer refer to overweight children as obese because it hurts their feelings. Instead, we should say, 'not fat' and then wink.”

If your premise is that college textbooks are expensive, then let's see you act out buying the textbook. Or maybe we get to see you act as if you're the head of a textbook company, sitting on a yacht bragging about how the boat was paid for by selling eight copies of “Inorganic Chemistry of Non-Metals”. Or maybe there's a homeless man on the streets of L.A. clutching a copy of “Tribal Rituals of the Yucatan Peninsula” which is the only collateral he has to get a loan for soup.

Exercise: Using your list of premises, write 10 possible act outs.

The Mix - A mix is when you take two seemingly unrelated concepts and put them together to see how they could fit together in your comedic worldview. For example, if you take Adolf Hitler and put him into any scenario other than being brutal leader, then it usually ends up being humorous. What if Hitler was a kindergarten teacher, an employee at Jiffy Lube, or a tour guide at the zoo? Would Hitler be successful at getting little children to take a nap, or would he scream at them to go to sleep until they all started crying?

Not every joke has or needs a mix, but they are extremely common in stand-up because they are great way to expand an idea and generate some hilarious situations and concepts.

Exercise - Mixing Through Double-Column Brainstorming

Choose two topics that you want to mix together. Draw a line down the middle of a page. Write one topic at the top of the page on one side and the other topic on the other side. List 25 things related to each of those topics. The list can include details, people related to the topic, historical events, songs, etc.

Example: if you combine former student Kevin's camping list from the brainstorming workbook with a vegetarian list then you might find something funny.

| <u>Kevin's Camping List</u> | <u>The Vegetarian List</u> |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| campfire | animal lover |
| hunting for firewood | health food |
| starting the fire | thin |
| cavemen | not muscular |
| the invention of fire | criticizes other people's eating habits |
| cooking with fire | tofu |
| sitting around the fire | meditates |
| roasting marshmallows | meat substitutes |
| fiery marshmallows are like napalm | examines labels |
| smoke in your eyes | shuns leather |
| fire going out during the night | likes to hike |
| extinguishing the fire | shops at Whole Foods |
| "We Didn't Start the Fire" (song) | visits farmers markets |
| park rangers | environmental activism |
| forest fires | yoga |
| Smokey the Bear | has fewer options on a menu |
| "Only you can prevent forest fires." | gardens |
| wild animals | Indian food |
| bug spray | multivitamins |
| forgot to bring toilet paper | occasionally eats fish |

Exercise - Read the lists a couple times and try to find ways of combining the two topics to find what could be funny.

Example:

"There were no vegetarian cavemen. No caveman ever stopped his buddies at the end of a hunt and said, 'Wait, let me look at the label. Ah man, the main ingredient is mammoth.'"

Not hilarious, but if you wrote 10 jokes you might find a great joke.

Inference versus Reference

Achieving the surprise needed for a punchline to work involves letting the audience get the joke. Over-explaining a joke will kill it. When mixing ideas, let the audience bridge the gap between the two concepts. *Inferring* what you are trying to say is usually better than *referring*. If you refer too much to the information you are trying to convey with the joke, then you'll take away from your punch. But if you infer instead, then you let the audience make the leap from premise to punchline.

Say you're talking about a dog park and you want to compare it to a bar scene for dogs. There are overly-aggressive dog that you wish were kept out or kicked out. You can just say, "I think this dog park needed a bouncer" and people get the idea, they connect the idea to a bar. If you go into too much detail and say, "This park needed a security dog that would throw out dogs if they got to crazy, like they have in bars. It needed a bouncer dog." then you've referred too much to what a bouncer is. In the first example though you've let the audience figure it out just by inferring to elements found in a bar.

Exercise - Rock Out With Your Magnifying Glass Out

Read this Chris Rock routine from his 1998 "Bigger and Blacker" album and identify **topic**, **attitude**, **premise**, **act outs**, **mix**, and then more **act outs**. Identify when he's just stating a fact.

Everybody's talking about gun control. You don't need no gun control. You know what you need? We need some bullet control. We need to control the bullets. I think all bullets should cost \$5,000. \$5,000 for a bullet. You know why? Because if a bullet cost \$5,000 there would be no more innocent bystanders. Every time somebody would get shot they'd say, "Damn, he must have did something. They put \$50,000 worth of bullets in his ass." People would think before they killed somebody if a bullet cost \$5,000. "Man, I would blow your head off ... if I could afford it. I'm gonna get me another job. I'm gonna start saving money, and you a dead man. You better hope I can't get no bullets on layaway." So even if you get shot

by a stray bullet, you won't have to go to no doctor to get the bullet taken out. Whoever shot you would take their bullet back. "I believe you've got my property."

As I've said, a lot of comedy writing just comes from producing a lot of material just so you can get to that one funny line. It may sound like a lot of work, but when you get that big laugh it will all be worth it.

Let's go over a couple more exercises that can help you to just start thinking in a funny way. Not every exercise is meant to produce a usable bit, but some can help train your brain to think quickly.

World's Worst is a popular improv comedy game. [Here's the cast of *Who's Line Is It Anyway?*](#) playing it.

The game can also be used as a writing exercise just to get your mind thinking in a funny way. Just take something familiar and imagine who it could be stretch it in an absurd way. For example, a hammer. What would the world's worst hammer be like? Maybe it's made out of marshmallows (ineffective). Maybe it constantly says mocking things to the fingers holding the nail (annoying). Maybe it's a giant boulder duct taped to a redwood tree (unusable). Maybe it's a screwdriver (inappropriate) or a lemon (absurd).

Exercise - World's Worst

Choose a topic and brainstorm a list of 20 details about it. For example, if the topic is the police, then write everything you can that is related to police.

1. handcuffs
2. siren
3. uniforms
4. tazers
5. DUI checkpoints
6. drug-sniffing dog
7. etc.

Next go through each item and try to imagine the world's worst version of whatever it is.

1. The handcuffs are pink and fuzzy.
2. The siren is a man's voice saying, "Hey, hey, hey!" and it increases in pitch and volume as the car goes faster.
3. The uniforms say "Who farted?"
4. The tazer also shocks the cop.
5. The DUI checkpoint sells beer.
6. The drug-sniffing dog is an ex-felon that refuses to snitch on other criminals.

--Advice from the Green Room--

When comics are just hanging around, there's usually someone testing out a new bit. If it's funny then usually the other comics will start "riffing" on the idea to see if they can help make the joke even funnier. Riffing means that a comic is just improvising on a concept, trying to flesh it out by just running with the idea.

A lot of the riffing may go something like: "That's funny! What if the cop ran out of handcuffs and just had to use bras instead? By the time the criminal gets the bra undone, they'll already be at the jail." Riffing with my comic friends is one of my favorite things about this path I've chosen.

Logan Murray, a British comedian, wrote a book that is a bit hard to find, but it's an extremely thorough examination of every aspect of comedy. It's called [Teach Yourself Stand-up Comedy](#) (McGraw-Hill 2008). It is chock-full of writing exercises. One exercise called "Seven Deadly Sins" (page 39) is a great way to see the affect of applying a strong attitude to the topic you want to explore:

Exercise - "Seven Deadly Sins"

Write down a list of things that you do. It could be anything:

I like to walk to work.
Every Tuesday night I do the food shopping.
My job is to pick up the kids from school.

Then, apply each one of the deadly sins to it in turn.

Logan Murray's Example:

1. (Greed) I like to walk to work - I love the fact I'm saving \$1.50 on the bus fare, but I worry about the shoe leather I'm using. Perhaps I should go barefoot.
2. (Sloth) I'd *like* to walk to work - but I just can't be bothered, maybe if I slip my friend a couple bucks they can piggyback me to the office.
3. (Pride) I like to walk to work - it gives me a chance to shout 'Good Morning, Scum' at all the lesser beings. The only drawback is I have to smell their unwashed bodies.
4. (Gluttony) I like to walk to work - I pass three cake shops on my way, and even though they are not open yet, I like to lick the windows and pretend.
5. (Anger) I like to walk to work - WALK! Do you hear me? Not dawdle, you old age pensioner. Now get out of the way before I push you and your walker into the road!
6. (Lust) I like to walk to work - then I can saunter up behind people I fancy and look at their bottoms with them noticing.
7. (Envy) I like to walk to work - who am I kidding? I want to drive - sod the environment. I want one of those turbo-charged boy racer cars that my neighbor has, all chrome and fuel injected. I want to be sitting in one of his big plush, leatherette bucket seats, rather than standing here, waiting for the lights to change and choking on his fumes as he thunders by.

Listen Up

A lot of material can come from random things you hear or see that strike you as funny. For a full day, listen to people's casual conversations and see if they say anything that sounds funny or strange--in or out of context.

I saw a billboard the other day that just said "Learn to Read." I guess they mean, "Right Now!" "Here's your first lesson---go!" Why would you have a sign like that? If you can read, you can read---you don't need it! And if you can't read and you're sitting next to somebody..." What's that sign say?" "Learn to read." "Well, that was mean." "I just asked you a question."

And What Do You Do?

Most stand-ups are working one or several day jobs while they are trying to hone their craft. A lot of the jobs suck. Good. There's comedy in that drudgery. Mike Rowe has made a fortune doing "*Dirty Jobs*." Why? Because we love to hear about other people's misery. Share your misery with us.

It's a safe bet that everyone in your audience has had a crappy gig--maybe even the same one you have. Instant bond. If by chance you have folks in the audience who have not had crappy jobs, like trust fund babies, or big fat liars, they will enjoy laughing at your pain. Everybody wins.

Caution--don't get *too* detailed if your job is really technical or really gross. Just give enough detail so the audience gets what you do then help them relate to your job's universal crappiness.

Exercise - Job Description

Write down everything you can think of about your job--what you do, where you do it, who you work with. What do you hate about it? Love about it? What's hard about it? Any weird encounters with customers or co-workers? Any secrets you can share? People love being let in on secrets.

Kevin's Example: The job is a gas station attendant.

My favorite part was filling up the bags of ice since I didn't have to talk to anyone.
I cringed when I saw someone I knew from high school.
I hated waking up at 3:30 am.
I didn't care if I was selling cigarettes to underage high schoolers.
Once I got in trouble for singing the National Anthem once as the lights were turning on over the pumps.

From this point you have the tools of the trade to begin writing your own material. Don't get discouraged if you're not coming up with hilarious material on the first try. Remember that comedy takes time and practice, and it's a craft. You might need to work through this workbook a few times before some of the concepts become more second nature.

Soon though, you'll have some jokes you like. Once you have jokes, you can build an act. And that means you're ready to move on to next workbook, *Your First Five Minutes*.

Your First Five Minutes

Open Funny, Close Strong
-workbook-

It Takes Timing...

How many jokes do you need? First, it depends on how long you have to be on stage. My first time on stage, I got three minutes. Typically you'll get 3-5 minutes on stage. Let's work with a five minute time slot. For a five minute time slot, I recommend having four minutes of jokes. Why? Because hopefully you'll be getting laughs. Laughs will eat up some of your time, which is good. If you're not getting laughs, then you'll be happy you only prepared four minutes. Also, it's bad etiquette on a show to do more time than you're supposed to.

Next it depends how long your jokes are.

"Psychologists say we should no longer refer to overweight children as 'obese' ... because it hurts their feelings. Instead we're supposed to say, 'Not fat' and then wink."

That's just a short one-liner, 10-15 seconds when delivered. If you did 10 of those, you're halfway done.

Get It Together

First things first--you have to write your set.

Exercise - Go through your jokes and determine what your attitude is for each one. Make sure it is consistent. If you're angry about politicians one minute, and then talking about how much you love the Superbowl next, then it makes it harder for the audience to follow you. There's more on this later in this workbook in "Who Are You, Again?"

Exercise - Time your material to get a general idea of how long everything is.

--Advice from the Green Room--

Going up your first time is scary. Some comics are so worried that they aren't going to be funny or don't have enough time that they resort to the biggest NO-NO in comedy: stealing jokes.

It's better to bomb than to get laughs with someone else's material. That doesn't just mean don't steal a joke from an obscure comedian on YouTube. It includes doing jokes that you find on the internet.

You may fool the audience, but you can't fool the other comics. We know the jokes, and we know lots of comedians. You'll get caught. And when that happens, you'll lose the respect of your peers. They won't want to

write with you, and they will always be wondering when you're going to steal from them. Comics respect others who are willing to step on the stage and face the audience. Even if you suck, they still respect you. But not if you're found out to be a joke thief.

Lining up the Lines

Arrange your set so it's most effective. Put short, solid material up front to get the ball rolling. Make sure you have a strong bit to open and close on. Let the audience get to know you. Let them get an idea of where you're coming from, your point-of-view. Then, once they trust you and your ability to make them laugh you can go into more challenging material, whether it's edgier or more experimental. This is just a rule of thumb.

Arrange your set as you would if you were meeting someone for the first time at a party. That's why you hear the hack (done to death) opening line "a little bit about myself" so often. Some of your material will work better once the audience has gotten to know you. If you immediately launch into an angry rant, you might turn off the audience. Will it work sometimes? Maybe. Are you making your job more difficult? Yes.

Segues - Moving From Joke to Joke

Try to set up your set so that related jokes are together. That makes it easier for the audience to stay with you, and for you to remember your show. Don't worry too much about seamless segues right now. It might sound artificial:

"...that's the last time pet a stranger's dog! Speaking of dogs, I saw a goth guy wearing a leash at the mall. I hate the mall. The dumbest thing about the mall is..."

In a short set, it's more important for your set to have a consistent attitude than to flow seamlessly. If you can make it sound natural then do it. The best thing about segues is that if a few jokes are linked together then you only need one keyword on your set list.

Your Set List

It's easier to remember seven keywords than five pages. The keyword is not the broad topic of the joke. It's a few words that will instantly remind you of the joke. Ideally, you want the set list to be as few words as possible. If you must look at your set list--though you should rehearse enough not to need it--then you'll have a better time finding your next line if there are seven keywords than 17.

Exercise - Make your set list. (See "Perform Like a Pro.") Turn your jokes into keywords.

Example:

type no
strongest man
airplane rope
Chicago
time machine
ye olde
twisted sister
cat song

That for me is a seven-minute set.

What Was That Joke Again?

The question comics get asked over and over again is "How do you remember all those words?" You may be wondering the same things.

First of all, you rehearse. You go over your routine again and again. Out loud. Hearing yourself say the words will help you to remember them. However, don't rehearse with your friends. Right now, they'll be hearing your show out of context, which may make it seem less funny than it really is.

When you're practicing (and you must practice), listen to the flow of words to see if it has a good rhythm. If you find yourself stumbling on a line again and again, rewrite it. If a line just sounds cumbersome, shorten it.

Try to vary longer bits and shorter bits, so there is variety in your show.

Practice your set at some point before you go to the club. The better you know what you're going to say, the less you'll be thrown off by having an actual audience...or knowing your friends are watching...or having to go first...or ..last...or anything else.

No matter how many times you've said these words, always do a set list. Simply put a set list is just a list of the jokes you're going to tell. 99% of all comics, not just beginning comics, use set lists. Some even bring them on stage with them. They shouldn't. If you are Jerry Seinfeld or Kathy Griffin working out some new bits for next TV special, the audience won't mind it, because you're Jerry Seinfeld or Kathy Griffin. Otherwise, you should memorize your set. It makes the audience think you care enough to prepare for them.

Exercise - Practice a lot, but not in front of a mirror. You'll pay too much attention to how you look when you do your set and not being genuine when you do your set.

Exercise - Record a video of yourself. Look at yourself on video when you're done.

Who Are You, Again?

Remember, except for your friends and your Aunt Stacy, the audience doesn't know anything about you. Make sure your first few jokes give them a clue. "I've been married for 13 long...weeks" says more about you than "Marriage is tough, huh?" We know right off the bat you're married, a newlywed, and it's not going so well. We know the tone of your set already.

Exercise - Make sure your whole set has that tone. Don't set us up to think you have a difficult time of it as a married guy, then talk about your girlfriend in the next sentence. If Larry the Cable Guy suddenly started debating the virtues of no-load mutual funds, he'd lose credibility.

Imagine if you had to give me a biography of who you are in a five minute set, using only comedy. What would you tell me?

Exercise - So...tell me. Write a funny biography of yourself that is based in reality.

"When I was ten, my family moved to Downer's Grove, Illinois. When I was twelve, I found them." - Emo Philips, from Downer's Grove, IL.

After writing the bio, you'll have come full circle as far as the preparation process. You've learned the fundamentals, and realized the importance of having your comedy come from a truthful place in you. You've written material, put it together, and then taken a final inventory of who you are.

Cramming for the Test

Studying comedians is a great way to learn.

Watch a lot of stand-up. Comedy Central's [Live at Gotham](#) is a great place to start. Some of the clips will just be one joke from their act. Be sure to find the videos where you see them from start to finish. You should also be able to find Live at Gotham on Netflix.

Exercise - Pay attention to the comedian's attitude, the material they chose to open and close with, and how they transition from topic to topic.

Help Me Help You

Since lots of comics deal with nervousness in the days before their first time on stage, it's important to try to keep some things in mind between the time you finish your set and actual go on stage.

- The audience is not the enemy. Believe it or not, every person in that audience wants you to be funny. At the beginning of your set they trust you. They have put themselves in your hands.
- Let them trust you. Be confident. You'll be a little nervous, sure, We all are. But nervous energy is still energy. Give it to the audience, and they'll give you that energy back.

- If you are too nervous on stage, the audience begins to worry about you, which means they feel sorry for you, which means they feel bad for laughing, which means they won't. Or if they do, it's AT you, not WITH you.

It's all been building up to the next step, actually performing. And that's the subject of our next workbook: *Perform Like A Pro*.

Stand-Up Stage Craft

How To Perform Like A Pro
-workbook-

Coming To The Stage...

Before you get on stage, it's good to get some insight on how to literally get on stage. It's more than just making sure you don't trip on the steps.

Exercise - Watch some stand-up videos with the sound off.

Comedy Central's [Live at Gotham](#) is a great place to start. Some of the clips will just be one joke from their act. Be sure to find the videos where you see them from start to finish. You should also be able to find Live at Gotham on Netflix.

You can get a lot of info about how a comic performs without hearing a word.

Watch how they enter and exit the stage, how they remove the mic. Where are they looking? Where do they put the stand?

Exercise - Now watch again with the sound on. Pay attention to the first 30 seconds. This is similar to the last exercise in the Your First Five Minutes workbook, except that this time pay attention to what the comedian did before they did their opening joke.

How do they establish a rapport? When they grabbed the mic, did they immediately start the first bit or did they take a few seconds to get comfortable. A lot of scared comics immediately launch into material like they just hit their act's play button. You don't want to sound over-rehearsed.

Did it seem like their opening few minutes sounded like an introduction? Is it localized? "I just flew in here..." "I love being in (this city)..." "You guys can't drive..."

Do they start with a few quick laughs before going into longer routines?

How did they end their set?

Get On Up

How you take the stage can be just as important as what you say once you get there. Some general rules for getting on stage:

Shake the emcee's hand. Just something you do.

Before you get on stage, decide if you want the mic in the stand or out. If you want it out, take it out pretty soon after you get on stage. Put the mic stand behind you initially, even if you grab it later for an act-out or just to have something to do with your hands. That way it doesn't block the audience's view of you and your brilliance.

Be mindful of where the mic is in relation to your mouth. Make sure the audience can hear you. The mic

should be a few inches away from your mouth, but not six inches. It shouldn't be blocking your mouth. Normally in an open mic setting, the PA system is going to be pretty basic. Just listen to the sound of your voice coming out of the speakers. If you sound quiet, move the mic closer to your mouth. If you sound really loud, you should pull it away.

Don't make the amateur mistake of holding the mic like a rock or hip hop star, where they cup the top of the mic in their hand and hold it right up to their mouth. It causes the mic to feedback and sound tinny. Hold onto the handle.

Don't wear a hat. If you must, make sure it is leaning back on your head. (more on this soon)

The Night of the Show: Who's the Boss?

You should get to the club at least a half hour before that the show is scheduled to start, for several reasons:

- If it's not in your town, and sometimes if it is, you may have trouble finding the place. Managers and emcees don't care that your Mapquest map is wrong or that you had trouble parking.
- You have to find out who's hosting that night. Even if it's your home club, the emcee can change with every open mic. The regular emcee may be giving a more veteran open miker a chance to try his emcee wings. If that's the case, cut her some slack. You never know when it'll be your turn to host and you need some TLC.
- It gives you a chance to check out the room. Where's the stage? Believe it or not, in some places, this is a legitimate question. How do you get up on stage--steps up front? From backstage?
- The emcee doesn't have to worry about you. You've given him one less headache. Also you might be able to chat up some of the other comics about the club, who the manager is, who determines who works there, etc.

Where do the comics sit? Most clubs have a designated area for them.

Are drinks (including soft drinks and bottled water) free or discounted? Do you go to the bar (with a bartender you ALWAYS tip) or do the comics have a designated server (who you ALWAYS tip, even if they just get you a glass of water)?

Is the owner/manager around? If he is, can you just say hello? If so, just say hello. He's probably busy. Just scope out the situation. If he's busy, he might not be as busy once the show start. Maybe waiting until after the show is the best idea. It's your call.

Besides, he hasn't seen your show, so he's not very likely to give you work. All you're doing right now is building relationships--with the owner and/or manager, the other comics, the guy who runs the open mic. You're paving the way to get to come back again.

They're Playing Your Song--Last Second Advice

When you take the stage, whether you're at an open mike with three minutes, or the headliner with 45, you have to own the stage. Believe it or not, the audience wants you to be funny. They want you to be in charge (with a few exceptions--see "You Suck!", below).

If you come on stage with no confidence, the audience doesn't think what you have to say is important, and, therefore, not worth listening to, so they won't. (See "Your First Five Minutes-Help Me Help You")

Don't forget, BREATHE! The more nervous you get, the less you breathe, the less oxygen gets to your brain and--boom!--you forget stuff. It's fine to just stop for a second and take a breath. The audience will wait for you.

That said, don't be afraid of silence. Newer comics tend to rush through their sets, barely stopping to let the audience catch up. Believe me, if you're doing well, the audience needs a minute to relax. If you're not, you need a second or two to get your bearings and redirect yourself.

Have fun. If you're not having fun, the audience will know. They'll start to feel awkward along with you. If you're not getting laughs, it will be obvious to everyone. Having bad sets -- bombing -- is part of every comic's early career. Face it. It's going to happen.

What's Happening?

Comedy is live theater. There's more than just the show going on. People want to know you are there with them. Don't just start talking, necessarily. If the room is weird in some way, call it. "This place looks like my parents' basement. All we need is an old foosball table in the corner." Or "Shots are only a dollar here--that's cheaper than Communion Sunday. It costs me a tithe to drink in my church."

It doesn't have to be killer material. Just the fact that you are commenting on what people are already thinking will help you get them to listen, which is a big part of getting them to laugh. But remember--if the first 5 comics just talked about dollar shots, don't be comic number 6, which is why you...

Be careful about not crossing the line. The club owner doesn't want the audience thinking, "Now that you mention it, this place is disgusting." It should all be lighthearted. You never know when the owner is going to be unreasonable. Even if the owner is wrong, he's right.

Watch It, Buddy!

If you're not the first comic, you're in a special position, because you get to watch the other comic(s) before you and gain valuable info.

If every comic comes out and says, "Hey, how you guys doing?" they are going to get tired of answering it, so don't ask. Ditto "Who's married?" or "Who has kids?" or "Who's drinking tonight?"

Don't pander to the audience. If your punchline is "America's the best!" or "Cancer sucks, right?" drop that joke. Don't go for cheap applause

Did the comics before you do girlfriend material? Do you? If you do, is yours different from theirs? If not, try to make it different, or skip it altogether. If so, good, maybe...

Does the audience seem to hate girlfriend material, or will you be the fifth person in a row to "break up with his girlfriend?" You might want to put a different spin on your girlfriend material, or get rid of it. Better to go short with a set that works, than do your time and have them not like part of it.

Proof Positive

Record yourself. Audio works, but video is best. Some clubs have facilities to record you, free or for a small fee. Ask 'em. If where you are doesn't have video capabilities, it time you bought a video camera. Nothing fancy--it's just so you can see and hear yourself for feedback.

FLIP cameras work. So do inexpensive digital video cameras. You might have to check with management to find the best place to set stuff up...and get permission to shoot--even if you're just shooting yourself. Always get permission for stuff like that. It's just respectful.

Bright Light! Bright Light!

And lastly, when you step onto the stage, the lights might be so bright that you won't be able to see past the front row. Your eyes will adjust. Don't hold your hand up over your eyes to block it out. The audience has no idea how bright the light are. All they know is that they can see you very well. Commenting on the bright lights is just one way to show that you're an amateur.

When was the last time you heard a comic on TV say, "Wow! These lights are bright. I can't see anything." You haven't. By the time a comic makes it onto TV, they know that part of show business and being on stage is part of the gig.

You're On (Really ON!)

Every time you go on stage, it has to be like the first time. No, not all sweaty palms and nerves. You have to tell your jokes like it's the first time you've told anybody, even if it's the 100th time.

Comedy involves a little bit of acting. You are acting like your jokes are the most important things you've ever said and Thank God, this particular audience is here to hear it. Otherwise, why get on stage?

Every thing you say has to have a **SUIT**---Structure, Urgency, Importance and Technique.

Structure - Is your joke well-written? Does it tell us something about you?

Urgency - Why are you telling us this? Why do we need to know this right now?

Importance - Is the thing you're telling us a big deal? Is there a strong attitude behind it?

Technique - Are you selling the joke? That is, are you using your voice, face, and body to really make your point?

Know Thyself (and Thy Material)

Once you have performed several times on stage, you should have a pretty good idea what works and what doesn't. Once you do, you can begin to play with your material more--holding a second longer for a laugh here, adding something physical there. The more you can play with your material, the more fun you and the audience have, and the more spontaneous the show feels.

It may also happen that something you say isn't quite resonating with the audience. Maybe a certain topic isn't getting a good response. As you get more seasoned, you should be able to jump in and out of material. That is, either be able to go to a different topic if one isn't working, or do crowd work.

Crowd work is the art of being able to comment on something happening right there on the spot. Someone drops a glass; an audience member has a crazy laugh--whatever the situation, you have a clever comment.

Depending on the crowd, and your particular set, a question you throw out may get a certain response that is brimming with comedic potential. You might ask, "Anybody go to college?" and one guy might go "No!" which was not your expected response. Go with it. "I can see why. You're drunk on a school night. It's hard to pass the G-R-E when you just got a D-U-I." If you feel you aren't quite ready to field whatever answer you may get to a question, it's best to avoid questions in your show at first. Any time you ask a question, the possibilities for answers are endless, so your sharp comebacks better be too.

YIKES!--Bombing With Dignity

You're going to have jokes that fail. Hopefully not tonight, but it happens to every comic. Unless the audience is just completely distracted, then it's not their fault. Don't blame them. Blame the joke. Sometimes the audience doesn't even know that a joke failed. They think that's the way it's supposed to go. If one joke falls flat, just glide past it and move on. If a really long bit, a wildly physical act out or a series of jokes don't work, then the audience will probably know. They're feeling awkward and losing confidence in you. Unless you know for sure that you've got a surefire joke coming up quick, then it's probably best to acknowledge what just happened.

"Maybe it's just me!"

"You should hear that joke when it's funny!"

"Well, that didn't work."

"At least you guys are honest when you don't like a joke."

"That seemed a lot funnier in my head."

The audience will laugh because you've made fun of yourself and recognized what everyone else did: that you just laid a stinker on the stage. You released the tension that was building up.

YIKES!--You Suck!

Every comic's biggest fear is a heckler ruining the show. However, you can get the best of any heckler, or at least lessen the damage, if you stay calm and in control.

Heckling is any disturbance of the show by audience members.

Hecklers that yell stuff are trying to be funny. Rarely are they trying to be mean. Some are just drunk and unaware that they are talking too loudly.

If they're heckling, that doesn't mean that they're being a jerk. Most heckling you can ignore. When you can't ignore it, like when someone shouts out during a quiet part, it's sometimes helpful just to repeat what the heckler said.

Basically the heckler is interrupting the show. The rest of the audience is wondering who this guy is that thinks he has the right to interrupt their comedy show. This might be the only night they can make it out, and some idiot is spoiling it.

The easiest thing to do is just to make fun of the heckler. If you say anything even slightly funny, the audience is going to be supportive and laugh.

The different types of heckling:

- **Drunk Heckler**--This guy (or gal) just yells random stuff, maybe at you, maybe not. Ask what he/she said. If they can repeat it, it's probably random garbage. Just repeat it back in a drunken slur. Or say "I forgot my drunk to English dictionary." Usually good for a laugh. Now back to your show.
- **Random Commenter**--This person has something to say about what you're saying. Sometimes they are your own personal Amen Corner. "I heard that." "So true.", etc. A simple "I love it when my mom comes to the show" will suffice, just to let them know they might want to tone it down.
- **Comedy Helper**--This person wants to be a part of the fun. He has friends to impress and an ego to boost. You might say, "My girlfriend is mad at me." He may add, "So's mine. Wanna trade?" before you can get to your actual punch line. Again asking him to repeat what he's said is helpful. It also give you time for a witty retort, such as "Maybe your girl is mad at you because you yell random stuff at comedy clubs."
- **Bulldozer**--Most times a well-turned comeback can shut these hecklers down. Sometimes, however, what does not kill them makes them stronger. Now we have a bulldozer. Fire at will. "You know I don't come to McDonald's (the strip club, your work release job) and mess with you while you're at work." "Boy Make-A-Wish must be getting really desperate if they sent you here." "Don't they have an IQ check for this place?" Or something equally as clever that you come up with on your own.

Comedy caveat: Do not pounce on a heckler until they become a full-fledged bulldozer. If you pounce too soon, the audience may sympathize with the heckler and you become the enemy.

--Advice from the Green Room--

Aspiring comedians are often worried about hecklers. One of the easiest things for hecklers to do is make fun of your appearance, much like an immature high school bully. If you have aspect about you that is made fun of, and you bring it up right away, then you've effectively taken the ammunition away from the heckler. When I first started, I was a skinny young guy with a shaved head. As soon as I was about to start my act one night a guy shouted, "How's the chemo?" I deflected it and got huge laughs by saying that having chemo didn't stop me from doing some vulgar things with the guy's mother.

Not my proudest clever comedic moment, but it worked. After that, I wrote an opening line that immediately addressed my appearance. Before even saying hello I would grab the mic and say, "The answer is no. I'm not sick. Or getting better." Then I would go into my act. I don't use the line anymore because I no longer shave my head, but at the time it helped me to disarm at least some portion of the hecklers.

Leaving the Stage

Stick to your time. Shows have a structure. When you go over your time, you affect that structure. I've run multiple comedy open mics for years. One my shows, I have a set length of time that I will not exceed, about

90-100 minutes. After that, audiences start to get tired and/or drunk. Comedians come out with hopes of trying new material and getting better at their craft. I want to put as many comics up as possible in that time frame.

If you “go long” then other comics will complain about you because they wish they could do more time but choose to respect “the light” (which tells you that you have 60 seconds remaining). Also, when you go over your time that means that other comedians waiting to squeeze onto the show have to go home without performing. It's rude, disrespectful, and it might mean that you don't get allowed on stage next time. Plus, in a professional setting it could mean that you don't get booked again. That's a loss of experience and money.

Don't burn bridges. Don't be a jerk. Respect the light.

Most Important of all, enjoy yourself. Comedy is fun--that's why you want to do it. So have fun.

Cleaning Up After Yourself

Before you leave the stage, put everything back in its place. The mic goes back in the stand. The stand gets returned to the front and center of the stage. If you moved the stool, return it to where you found it. Shake the emcee's hand and...

It's All Over!

You did it! You got up on stage, and for better or worse, you did your five minutes. Now let yourself be proud. Enjoy the rest of the night. Try not to second guess yourself (although you will---all comics do.) Review that video TOMORROW, preferably with a comedy buddy, so you can get an objective opinion. Accept the congratulations from everybody. You're a comic.

Drop Everything (Or Don't Drop Anything)

Now that you have a set, what do you with it? Once you evaluate what works and what doesn't, decide how to make your set better. Can you change some wording in some jokes to make them work, or do you need to drop them altogether? Do you need to move some jokes around? Did you discover a better opener or closer?

Some comics drop their whole set and write a new set for each open mike. If you do that, you may never put together that perfect set, and be able to build on it. Better to keep your original set, at least in part, and tweak it.

Now get to work on next week's set or tomorrow night's set, even better. Continue to get on stage as often as possible. Comedy is like learning how to play guitar...except that you can only practice on stage...in front of an audience...for a few minutes a week.

Now that you're performing, it's time to start thinking about the topic of the next workbook: *The Business of Comedy*.

Where to Go From Here

When comics ask for advice, I hate telling them the brutal truth. There is no trick to getting better. You just have to put in the hard work. That means getting on stage as much as often. Every time you step on stage you will get more confident, and confidence is one of the most valuable commodities in this business.

I've known a lot of comedians that have made it on TV, whether it's the Tonight Show, Last Comic Standing, Comedy Central, etc. I can tell you what I have observed from them.

- Develop a DAILY writing routine and stick to it.
- Always have a small notebook of some kind on you.
- Find a comedy buddy with the similar comedic sensibilities as you.
- Become a student of stand-up comedy and watch as much stand-up as possible.
- Get on stage as many times per week as possible.
- Don't make excuses for not writing or performing.
- Record and review every set, especially the bad ones.
- Get comfortable with modern tech (Facebook, Twitter, your website).
- Expect to spend years developing your craft.

Write Away

You should be writing every day. Some comics treat writing like a job. They get up in the morning and devote a certain number of hours to writing no matter what. If you're lucky enough (or unlucky enough) to have that kind of time, and you have that kind of discipline, go for it.

For most beginning comics, however, it's difficult to find that kind of time, because of their day jobs. However you have to have some writing routine---an hour at night before *Jeopardy!* comes on, while you're in traffic during your commute (use an audio recorder please---safety first), early in the a.m. before you jump in the shower.

Remember--it's not as important how long you write as it is that you write consistently--every day.

Two of a Kind

It really helps to have a buddy you can count on in this business. You need somebody to try out jokes on who will give you a honest opinion. You need somebody who can stand to hear you complain about comedy---not getting gigs, lousy audiences, hack comedians--who has the same gripes. That said, you also want someone who will encourage you when you want to give up.

Some comics get lucky enough to have an experienced comic who mentors them. The veterans can show you the ropes, help you avoid pitfalls, get you in touch with bookers and clubs who might give you work. Mentors are generally different from comedy buddies, in that they rarely hang out all day and talk comedy or go to open mikes. If you are lucky enough to find a mentor, understand his or her time is valuable. He or she may not always be available for a cup of coffee five times a week or want to come see your three minutes on open mike night. Very important: let a mentor come to you. If he wants to take you under his wing, he'll let you know.

Watch and Learn

Go to the comedy clubs as often as possible. At least go every week to see the pros. You can't learn how to play baseball without watching a lot of games, even if you're a natural. Same with comedy.

Write down what you like (and don't like) about the comics you see. This will help you form your own style and give something to which to aspire.

Go to open mike nights, wherever they are, even if you aren't on the show, for several reasons. It shows whoever's paying attention (owners, bookers, other comics) you are serious about comedy, and you're

supportive of other comics. Plus, the more familiar you are, the more likely owners and managers are to think of you when they want someone for professional work.

Comic For Sale

Even if you are just starting out, you need to be in the loop, so get on Facebook and Twitter, even if you don't think you have that much to say. Again, it's about familiarity. You want people to have you on their minds. Caution--don't complain about or bad mouth ANYONE on Facebook or any media. The crappy open miker of today may be the headliner of tomorrow, and comics have lo-o-o-ong memories. So do owners, bookers and managers.

Eventually you'll need a website. Don't get one as an open miker--you just look silly and no one will take you seriously. Once you start working, it's invaluable. It should have your availability, your bio, clubs and colleges you've worked (if you've only worked bars, don't put the name--just the city and state), any video or audio samples of your work.

While we're at it, get business cards, but, again, only if you are starting to turn pro. Make sure it has your picture on it so people remember where they got it. Get headshots, too. Ask other comics where they get theirs. They know some local person who works cheap.

Record Thyself

Invest in a small audio recorder, or, even better, a video camera if you didn't have your own for your first set. As a comic, you have to get used to seeing and hearing yourself objectively. The more you look at and listen to yourself, the easier that gets.

Now watch/ listen to what you recorded, but not that same night. Comics tend to think they did better or worse than they actually did. If you give your set a day's distance, you'll be more objective. Also show your set to your comedy buddy. She'll be more objective still, and, therefore, more honest.

I Get Around

Get a car. Get a car. Get a car. Get it?

As a working comic (fingers crossed), you will be driving to almost every gig for YEARS. You need a reliable, reasonably comfy, cheap-to-maintain car.

Club owners don't care that your engine blew a gasket on the way to the gig, so make sure your car can get you there. Also you may not always be able to bum a ride with your fellow comics. Greyhound only goes to so many places, and if you don't have a car you're trapped in the hotel/condo all day. Boring.

Your car needs to be comfy to ride in, because you'll be in it a lot. But don't buy a brand-new ANYTHING, because you are going to be putting thousands of miles on this car and driving it into the ground--if you're lucky.

Once you have this car, budget for maintaining it. Oil changes, tires, gas--keep up with that stuff. Take care of your car and it'll take care of you.

Open Up

Now that you have that decent car, use it. Go to open mikes--all you can. If your city has an open mike, lucky you. If your city, has more than one, luckier you. If your city doesn't have any, go find one, two, ten! You gotta get out of town and see how the other comic lives, even if your city has an open mike or two.

A lot of comics only go to the one in their town and think that's plenty. The problem is, every town's comedy is different. Some local reference that might kill in your town will be completely lost on folks in another state. You gotta see if you funny EVERYWHERE.

Just like comedy is different in different clubs, so are the clubs themselves. And the comics. And the way you get to be on stage. You have to do research. It's not hard it just takes a lot of work and perseverance.

Get a map. Find all the comedy venues within a one-hour radius of you---bars, colleges, clubs. Visit those venues on open mike nights and regular show nights. Ask the comics how you can get on stage.. Be warned--some comics environments are hostile and insular. Those comics may not want an out-of-towner trying to "muscle in on their turf." But be persistent--don't just go once--become a regular. They'll get used to you and eventually somebody will let you know the score.

Not a lot of venues within one hour? Try two hours, even three. It's not like you have to drive to all these places in a week, but you should be at least driving to one or two places per week. If these places are local, you should be in one or more of them EVERY NIGHT.

Nobody's gonna knock on your door and ask you to come do comedy. You have to get out and be seen so people know you're a comedian, even if you don't feel like you're quite one yet, which leads me to...

Extra, Extra!

Tell everyone you want to be a stand-up comic, or at least you're working on it. Tell everyone when you are appearing at a bar or club, or going out of town, whether it's a paid gig, or an open mike. Tell friends, family, your barber, your mailman, the cop who writes you a ticket, everybody. The more people you tell, the more you are accountable to those people to become a bona fide comic. If you don't give it a hundred percent, everybody you tell will know.

The other benefit of telling everybody---EVERYBODY loves a stand-up comic. Everybody. You're doing something most people are too afraid to try, so they will live through you vicariously. "When's your next gig?" "Oh wow-- you are so brave." "I'd love to do that, man!" "How was your show last night?"

Lucky.

Oh Behave!

How funny you are is only part of how you get work. A big chunk of is also who you know and how you act, especially in clubs and at gigs.

Don't drink. Many comics like to have a drink at work. It's a bar for heaven's sake. Plus it calms the nerves, makes one social, etc. But there are a lot of comics who shouldn't drink, because:

- It makes them jerks.
- It makes them forget their sets.
- It makes them jerks to the audience.
- It makes them think they're funny when they're not.
- It makes them jerks to the club owners and staff.
- It makes them go over their time.
- It makes them jerks.

If you recognize yourself in any of the above statements, don't drink in clubs.

You certainly want to have a good relationship with your local club owner or manager, and all of them for that matter. So always be nice to the staff, do what's expected, be on time, get off stage on time, ask for feedback, actually use the feedback you asked for, repeat the aforementioned. Owners and managers love that.

What they **don't** love:

- Comics who monopolize their time--once you get feedback, move on. If the manager is too busy to give you feedback, ask later. Believe it or not, you aren't their only concern tonight.
- Comics who kiss-up--you don't have to bus tables, or help seat guests. You're a comic for cryin' out loud. Your job is to be funny and follow the rules. They can spot a brown-noser from a mile away. And once you start "helping out in the club," they will see you less and less as a comedian.
- Comics who want something for nothing--if you are emceeing for a week, don't expect to get 10 of your friends in every night or to have unlimited food and drink on the house, unless that's the club's policy. That stuff costs money--money you aren't bringing in. Check with the management about the rules on that stuff.

Know Who to Know

A buddy of mine, Paul, recently got his ego crushed by the manager of his home club., i.e., the club in his home town, or closest to it. This manager is a replacement for a manager who moved on to a different club. Paul expected the new manager to be as generous with stage time, as quick with praise, as free with recommending him for gigs as the old manager was. But the new manager didn't know Paul and didn't have the same relationship with him as the old manager. Paul thought because he had done so much for the club, not only as a comedian, but as a guy who always promoted the club, that the new manager would welcome him with open arms. Alas, that didn't happen, and Paul had two choices--develop a relationship with the new manager or find a new home club.

Paul's big mistake--he thought he was making friends with the CLUB when he was only making friends with the manager. Some clubs have a new manager every year, if not more often. Don't make the mistake of thinking you're always in with a club. You have to build relationships with the people who run things--how ever often those people change. That's why it's important to visit clubs often, and get to know everyone in the club, especially your home club. Servers, bartenders, managers, owners--all these people count. Many times if a manager leaves a club, the servers and bartenders, and there the ones who can put in a good word for you with a new owner or manager.

Overnight Success...Isn't

It seems like every day some new comics who's been doing comedy for about ten minutes is getting famous. Truth is, most comics work for years to get famous, by doing exactly what you just read. (You did read EVERYTHING, didn't you?) They just keep writing and going up all over the country and be nice to everybody and networking, and, eventually, an opportunity presents itself. Which leads to another. Then another.

The trick is to have done all your homework when that opportunity shows up. If someone wants you to do a show at their college mixer, but you haven't been writing or getting up on stage, that's a tall order. The comedy business is the stuff you do while waiting to get on stage.

If you treat comedy like a second job, then one day it could be your only job.

- - -

The following four workbooks pertain to improv, sketch and characters. If you can find a way to make it to one of the improv or comedy writing meccas, do it. I studied at The Second City Training Center in Chicago. Other famous schools are iO (formerly called improv Olympic), The Groundlings, UCB. Going to a big city and intensely training alongside others is a wonderful learning experience.

It's awesome to hang out with other comics who also packed everything up and moved to the city to follow their dreams.

Writing Funny Sketches

Write comedy sketches that work on stage
-workbook-

It's Not Pretty

To paraphrase Steve Martin, sketch comedy is not pretty. Most of us are raised on the sketch comedy we see on television with the big Kahuna being SNL. But if you break it down, SNL only does seven sketches a week. That's right. The rest is made up of musical acts, a monologue, commercial parodies, digital shorts and Weekend Update. Very little of the 90-minute show is sketch comedy.

Shows that are more consistent in their quality are Mr. Show, Dave Chappelle Show and The Kids In The Hall. You know, all shows that are no longer on the air. But what makes their work more enduring is that they didn't write for the audience. They write for themselves. This workbook will teach you the fundamentals of writing simple comedy sketches that you enjoy.

--Advice from the Green Room--

One of the most important things to know about writing is that it's all about re-writing. It is quite likely that the first draft of your scene is going to suck. Get over it. Writing a first draft is like throwing a clump of clay on a pottery wheel. Once you plunk it down, you can know start to shape and mold it into what you want. Sketches that end up in live stage revues can go through multiple rewrites before the script even gets into the hands of the actors. And, often, rewrites happen after that based on seeing the script "up on its feet." Bottom line: Writing is rewriting. Embrace it.

What Do I Write About?

Many people make the mistake of waiting for inspiration before writing. The good news is you don't have to wait for the funny idea to come along. You can hunt it down. There are several ways to do this. One is free writing.

Exercise - For a set amount of time, you put pen to paper and don't stop. You can use it as a brain dump or use it to rant about something that ticks you off. You are not writing for other people at this point. You are writing for yourself. Don't worry about spelling, don't worry about grammar, and don't worry about repetition. Dive in and explore your thoughts and feelings.

(See also: "Morning Pages" in the Fundamentals of Humor" workbook.)

The ideal amount of time to do this is 30 minutes. You can do more. You can also do less, although less than 10 minutes probably won't be very fruitful. You want to get beyond the point of "running out of ideas" and dig in to the next level of whatever your brain spits out. Let go and write.

When you are finished, look over what you wrote. This is panning for comedy gold. Is there a nugget in there you can develop into a scene? Is there a funny line that can be used? A comic twist that emerged?

VARIATIONS:

- Lists of 10 are also a great way to generate ideas. Use your own life to draw from.
- 10 Things That Tick You Off
- 10 Most Embarrassing Moments
- 10 Worst Days On The Job
- 10 Significant Moments

Exercise - Framing Your Idea

Go through your brainstorming ideas and see if anything pops out as having potential. It can be a simple sentence or a line of potential dialogue that indicates something more going on. Something that makes you visualize a situation is probably good for developing into a scene.

Take, for example, a notion that sprang out of free writing. "I hate it when my dad rags on me about my career."

What makes this good material for a potential scene is that it refers to a relationship (father and son), a strong feeling (hate) and a relatable situation (career choices, trying to be happy). What? It doesn't sound funny? Don't worry about it. Trust that the humor will come out of the recognizable and relatable situation.

The next step is to determine what's the best situation, or context, in which to present your idea. You don't have to make your scene biographical, but you can. But before you do, explore other possibilities by brainstorming a list of 10 scenarios.

For example:

- 1) Dad drops snide hints about job choice at holiday dinner
 - 2) Dad expresses disappointment at career when meeting boss
 - 3) Father-In-Law expresses disappointment at son-in-law's career choice in a toast at his daughter's wedding
 - 4) Dad loses it at graduation party because his son got a theater degree
 - 5) Son gets promotion and dad responds with extreme anger because he thinks his son is in a dead end job
- Etc, etc, etc

Structure

Stories have a beginning, middle and an end, as do the best comedy sketches. Comedy sketches are like short stories, though. You want to be careful to not over pack them. Keep them simple.

Exercise - Plot an outline for your scene. A sentence or two for each plot point. Keep in mind, you have three priorities.

- 1) Establish who, what and where (who is the main character and what do they want)
- 2) What's keeping them from getting what they want?
- 3) How can we make matters worse?

Notice, we didn't include the ending. If you have an idea for an ending, great. If not, that's okay, too. Right now, we're just looking to see how will set the scene and how it might go.

For example:

- 1) Lights up on a college graduation party for Todd. He is surrounded by friends and family. His mom brings out a cake for him. He's excited to be celebrated into adulthood this way.
- 2) He opens some presents. His dad gives him an envelope. Everyone thinks it's cash. It's something else. It's a bill. Dad wants his money back.
- 3) Dad goes off. He's been drinking. He's angry his son has a musical theater degree. He'll never get a real job. Waste of money, etc.

As you're writing, you might also get ideas for snippets of dialogue and things that can happen. Be sure to jot them down. You may want to use them. As I was writing this, I thought about Todd using his musical theater degree to convince his dad it was a good idea. Maybe he sings him a song.

Exercise - Write The Damn Thing

Now that you're able to envision your scene, write it. TV and film scripts have very rigid formats. The nice thing about writing for the stage is that there's no one specific way to write it. Keep in mind, that in writing for the stage, you're writing for actors and directors to interpret your scene. You need to give them enough information, but not too much. Most sketch revues use **very** minimal props and costumes and a neutral set that is used for all the scenes. Always include stage directions, especially at the opening of your scene so the reader knows what you intend to be happening on the stage.

A sample start might look like this...

"Graduation Day"
Written by M. Brilliant

(Lights up on Bill and Diana's living room. They are throwing a college graduation party for their son Todd. Todd wears his robe, open, and mortar and is drinking wine. He is surrounded by his sister Fran, his best friend Barry and his Aunt Nellie. His dad is off to the side, sulking. Diana enters with a cake with a candle on it for Todd to blow out.)

DIANA

Happy Graduation, Todd!

(Everyone cheers, except Dad.)

TODD
(blowing out candle)

Thanks, Mom.

DAD
(sarcastically)

It was a long five years, but you finally got that musical theater degree. Way to go, son.

DIANA

Let's open up your presents.

As you write, think in terms of what an audience member is seeing and hearing. Put yourself in their seat. What information do they need and when? One thing to avoid is telling the reader where everyone is all the time and every move they make. Leave that to the actors and directors later.

Exercise - Rewrite The Damn Thing

Now that you have written a first draft, rewrite it. Always have a goal for the rewrite, otherwise, you'll just end up expanding it and it will become unwieldy. Goals for a rewrite may be things like: flesh out characters, heighten the action, edit the dialogue (how can characters say what they are saying with less words or even no words), add activity or action, etc.

--Advice from the Green Room--

A good way to hear your script is to read it out loud. This will uncover many things, like how natural the dialogue may or may not sound. The next step is to have someone else read it or have other people read it out loud. They'll uncover other things, like if anything is unclear or unneeded. It's best to find people who share a similar sense of humor and who are also familiar with the form. Someone who has never read a scene before may not be helpful.

A Note About Endings

People tend to fret over how to end scenes. If your scene is telling a story, then the ending should be fairly simple to figure out. Either your main character gets what they want or they don't. Or they do and it's at a cost. Or they don't and they get something better, instead. Many writers get hung up on trying to end their sketches with a big laugh. While that is a desired effect, it is not necessary for all your scenes to end that way. Nothing wrong with a soft ending that ends in silence with the lights slowly fading. Do what's appropriate to the scene. Don't fall into the trap of forcing in a funny ending for the sake of having a funny ending. It will oftentimes be at the expense of the scene.

About the Author:

Joe Janes teaches sketch and improv comedy at the Second City Training Center and Columbia University in Chicago.

Writing Comic Characters

How To Write Hilarious Stage Personas
-workbook-

He's a Character

Characters work when people recognize them, or elements of them, from their own lives. Someone they know, have seen before or have had a run-in with. Some characters are funny for their own sake – look at the many background characters on “The Simpsons” or many of the SNL characters that weren’t developed into movies. Characters like “Duff Man” or “Disco Stu” or “Opera Man” or “Old Man.” They don’t even get full names! That’s because their characters are really only a bit. One that won’t sustain itself for more than a minute or two.

Enduring characters, like “Mr. Burns” or “Homer Simpson” or “Wayne and Garth” have fully worked out lives. They have emotions, they have relationships, and they have ambitions.

In this workbook, we’ll cover a few exercises you can do to write enduring comic characters. We’ll look at the components that make a character more than a slight caricature, characters that you can revisit and put into multiple situations.

--Advice from the Green Room--

There’s nothing wrong with characters that are essentially a one-note joke. But use them sparingly. The flirty nun, the angry clown, the alcoholic life coach – all fun stuff, but probably not worth expanding on. If you use them, keep it short. A complaint about SNL is scenes that go on too long. This is usually because we get the joke

of the character really quick and to have the scene go on for four minutes is beating it to death.

Finding Your Character's Voice

One method to fleshing out a character is to dig into a monologue. If you don't have a character in mind, a great way to get started is to randomly pick an action verb, like go, run, eat, jump, etc. Use that one word as a springboard for character. You can use it directly or indirectly. "Run" could mean that your character runs marathons or is an Olympic athlete. Indirectly, it could be a doctor who treats allergies (runny noses) or a political candidate (running for office). It doesn't matter what you do, it's just a place to start.

Exercise - Using that suggestion, you're going to write a monologue. For this monologue, there is no need to worry about what or where, just who. Writing in the first person, have the character just speak about his or her life.

Example:

"Hi. My name is Melanie Payne. I'm a mother. I have three kids. Three. All came out of my... you know. Never thought I'd be such a breeder. Life surprises you. My husband, Alejandro, asked me to marry him on our first date. Holy cow! That had never happened before. I thought he was trying to get a green card or something. Nope. He's just passionate. We have three kids – Ray, Nixon, and Alejandro, Jr. And we have two dogs named Trixie and Phillip. Phillip just had puppies. How do we afford it? We don't. I work two jobs. Alejandro works two jobs. Ray's old enough now to work at McDonald's. He helps out a bit. My mother and stepmother both think I'm in a bad situation, but I don't care. I love my husband. I love my kids. I love one of the dogs...."

My word was "multiply." The purpose of this part of the exercise is just to explore this character's life. If I were to continue, I'd dig into more family stuff, maybe best friends, religion, anything I thought she thought was important in her life. Also, any problems. Looking at what I wrote, she might have some trouble brewing with her mother or stepmother, or both, and may need to tell one of them or both to butt out.

Variations:

- Anything can kick off the germ of the character. Instead of action verbs, pick words randomly from the dictionary. Or use professions and emotional states smashed together. Write a monologue for the angry optometrist.
- Keep a list of real names you encounter in the world. Develop your character solely based on the name. Check mailboxes, news stories, name tags. I have a new neighbor named "Temple Hemphill." Can't wait to write that monologue.

TIP: Strive to keep your characters somewhat grounded in reality. It's okay if they are aliens or superheroes, but be sure to infuse them with human emotions and problems.

Your Character's Human Wants

Characters show themselves by going for what they want.

Exercise - Take the character from the monologue in the last exercise. Have your character now do a monologue in a specific time and place speaking to someone important in their lives. Someone they want something from.

A note about basic human wants

People fundamentally want one of four things: to be seen, to be heard, to be touch, to be loved. Touch can mean physical, but also emotional. Loved can be romantic or familial. These wants can be manifested in many ways. A son who wants to be seen by his father can be asking his dad to borrow the car. In order to borrow the car, the father will have to trust him and see that he is growing up.

Exercise - Figure out whom your character is talking to and what they want. The bigger the emotional risk, the better. It is much more interesting to see a wife try to ask her husband for a divorce than see a wife complain to her friend about her husband. And here's the fun part, don't have your character directly ask for what they want. Sketch comedy is a dysfunctional playground. Spend some time on the hint merry-go-round before your character spills the beans on what they really want.

Example: My new friend Melanie Payne's monologue might go something like this...

"That soup was delicious, Mom. Thanks for opening up a can of Campbell's for me... No, I'm not starving. There's plenty of food for all us... Yes, it's a lot of work, but I don't mind. When Alejandro gets home at night and the kid's are all in bed, it's nice... No. We're too tired for that... There you go, again. Mom. Since you retired and dad passed away, I think, well... Oh, hey, look. I was at the Laundromat and I saw this flyer for a Senior Square Dance. I think you should go. For fun. Take your friend, Margie. Maybe the two of you will meet some nice gentlemen...you like the smell of Ben Gay."

Melanie wants her mom to get as life and, in the process, but out of hers. She wants to be heard. I think in this particular monologue she'll eventually straight out tell her mother to butt out of her life. And, of course, hurt her feelings and try to take it back.

Character Components

Successful characters are easy to understand and easy to describe. Look at any of the main characters from "The Simpsons" to "The Original Star Wars." Each main character is distinct from the others and can be summed up in just a few words.

Mr. Burns: ancient, rich, greedy

Han Solo: space cowboy, rebel, smuggler

Homer: overeats, lazy, loves his family

Darth Vader: imposing, mysterious presence, uses dark powers to advance goals, father

Exercise - Take your character and see if you can distill them down to the following components...

PERSPECTIVE – How do they see the world?

FLAW – What makes them stand out? This can be physical or a demonstrable personality flaw.

POINT OF EMPATHY – What do they care about?

Example:

For Melanie, I might do this...

PERSPECTIVE – Born to be a Mom. This means everything she sees she filters through the thought – How can this help or hurt my family?

FLAW – Anal. Always cleaning. She has so many kids and pets; everything could go to crap in a heartbeat. She works tirelessly to keep things clean. She even takes this into her life when the kids aren't around.

POINT OF EMPATHY – She cares deeply about her family. She's selfless.

With these parts of her character now defined, I might rewrite my last monologue like this...

"That soup was delicious, Mom. Thanks for opening up a can of Campbell's for me... NO. I've got it. You stay seated... I have some wipes in my purse here. I'll just get this little spill on the table. Oh, and you have a little bit of soup on your mouth. Got it!...No, Mom. I'm not starving. There's plenty of food for all us... Yes, it's a lot of work, but I don't mind. When Alejandro gets home at night and I've finished mopping the floors and the kid's are all tucked into bed and the air purifiers are turned on, it's nice... No.

We're too tired for that... There you go, again. Mom. Since you retired and dad passed away, I think, well... Oh, hey, look. I was at the Laundromat giving the attendant pointers when I saw this flyer for a Senior Square Dance. I think you should go. For fun. Take your friend, Margie. Maybe the two of you will meet some nice gentlemen...you like the smell of Ben Gay."

Putting Your Characters Through Hell

A great way to draw out characters is to put them in situation where they don't naturally belong. This type of scene is known as Fish Out of Water. Most comedies that come out of Hollywood are Fish Out of Water. (Encino Man, Splash, ET, Austin Powers, Dumb and Dumber, King Pin, etc)

Exercise - Take your character and brainstorm a list of 10 places or situations where they would be out of their element.

Example: For uber-anal mom Melanie, my list might start like this...

1. An emergency room
2. A homeless shelter
3. A messy redneck family's home
4. A gas station in the country
5. A swinger's party

Once you have one you like, explore some possibilities. Your characters need to be there because they want something. You're not going to get a lot of mileage if they just accidentally wander in some place or are there based on a misunderstanding. Have them intentionally be there trying to get something they need. Even if it's a case of their car breaking down, they need to get something from the gas station owner.

Example: For Melanie, I like the swinger's party. Here are some possibilities...

1. She's there looking for her husband. She thinks he might be cheating on her.
2. It's her neighbor's. She has the night home free of kids and hubby and wants to let her hair down. She does not know it's a swinger's party. She thinks it's just a party.
3. She's trying to return her neighbor's flour sifter and will get it back to her any way possible.

Pick the one you think has the most potential and move to the next exercise.

TIP: Hang on to the list of 10! If you enjoy this character, you'll want to put him or her in other situations.

Exercise - Developing Fish Out Of Water Scenes

Now that you have a basic idea of what your scene is going to be about, it's time to plot it out a bit. This means figuring out the first three phases of your scene.

1. Who, What And Where
2. The problem
3. Heightening

Since this is a Fish Out of Water scene, it's important to establish what the foreign element is. If Melanie has never been to a swinger's party before, then I want to establish that.

1. Lights up on a suburban swinger's party in someone's living room. Two couples are making out. Off to the side is a guy with a leather collar and a desk bell. He dings the bell. The couples switch partners and resume making out. The doorbell rings. Melanie, supermom, enters wearing an apron and carrying a flour sifter.
2. She's trying to return the sifter to her friend who insists Melanie stay for the party.
3. She discovers one of the couples is her minister and his wife. Or the guy with the bell is the school principal where her kids go. Or her ex-boyfriend from high school.

Notice I gave myself some options for part three. I don't have to nail it down, right now. Since the other

characters haven't been fleshed out at all, I want to write the scene and see what might be the strongest choice when I get to that juncture.

Fish Out Of Water scenes usually result in the main character conflicting with the current situation and batch of characters. They oftentimes win them over by using their inherent skills to solve a problem in the new situation.

Example: Melanie might become a hit because she knows how to make pot brownies better than anyone.

--Advice from the Green Room--

Fish Out of Water scenes can be a lot of fun to write. Make sure you throw as many obstacles at your main character as possible. Particularly obstacles that would rub up against who they are. It's not unusual for FOW scenes to end with a "can't beat 'em, join 'em" situation. Melanie will either give in to the fun of swinging or convince everyone there that playing a nice, clean game of charades would be more fun. What drives the scene is the main character having a strong objective for being there. It's possible that returning a flour sifter might not do it. But if it does, that says a lot about Melanie's character.

About the Author:

Joe Janes teaches sketch and improv comedy at the Second City Training Center and Columbia University in Chicago.

Next we'll look at two workbooks that can help your comedy performance skills.

Improv Scenes From The Ground Up

Filling a blank stage with your imagination
-workbook-

The First Step

Getting up on stage and opening your mouth and saying anything is the first step. Now, that you're there, now what? The first mistake many new improvisers make is thinking they have to be funny and that everything that comes out of their mouth needs to be Robin Williams or "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" rapid fire funny. It doesn't. To be successful with an audience, it simply needs to be engaging and the humor will come you of the situation. One-liners or jokes in improvised scenes can often derail the scene. It takes us out of the reality of what's happening. And here's the good news, it's not about what you say or do, it's about how you react and respond to your scene partner.

In this workbook, we'll cover a few exercises you can do with a scene partner. You will need at least one other partner. There is such a thing as solo improv, but very few people can pull it off and those people are seasoned improv veterans. These exercises will help you build the skill you need to create scenes that have a solid foundation and go somewhere. In doing these exercises, I encourage you to remember that this is play. Regardless of your age, improv is playing. Not every scene is going to work. There's no need to beat yourself up over it. The important thing is to have fun, whether you are making mistakes or succeeding.

--Advice from the Green Room--

One of the biggest elements that will help you in improv is trust. Trust your partner on stage. It's easy to make your scene partner wrong if the scene's not going the way you think it should. The best thing to do is to let go of what you think "should" happen and let what's happening happen. Whatever they do or say is absolutely right and it's your job to make them look good. It's easy to get a laugh by negating something someone just said "I'm a doctor!" "No, you're not." It will get a laugh in the moment, but make it more difficult for the scene to go anywhere. "I'm a doctor!" "Thank God! My arm feels loose and feels like it might fall off." "Well, I'm a psychologist. Let me to talk to it for you." Now, we have someplace to go. Although, I do think that arm is doomed.

Who, What And Where?

It's very important to establish early in your scene who everyone is, where you are at and what are you

doing there. Scenes that don't do that tend to putter around until someone forces the scene to be about something.

Exercise - With a partner, practice establishing Who, What and Where in the first three lines of dialogue. You can do this by having the partners trade off who is entering the scene. They always get the first line of dialogue.

A – “Hi, honey. I'm home and I brought you flowers.”

B – “Oh, dear, you're the best husband a wife could ever have. I was just making you a lasagna.”

A – “For my birthday? You're the greatest.”

It might sound a little clunky, at first, but that's okay. The more you practice this, the better you can become at not stating things so on-the-nose.

A – “Oh, you're home.”

B – “Yes. Book Club got canceled. I sent the babysitter home and sent the kids to bed. I thought maybe we-“

A – “I'll get the Scrabble!”

Variations:

- If the three lines do not establish the three W's, the person with the first line has to re-enter with a whole new line.
- Limit the number of words everyone can say. Like, three words per line.
- Make it non-verbal. Everything needs to be established through object and environment work.

Something from Nothing

Nothing worse than watching two talking heads in a scene. You can be anywhere you want, doing anything you want and you choose to just stand and talk? It's boring. Having your characters interacting with objects and creating an environment paints a picture for both the improviser and the audience. Doing it effectively helps ground the reality of a scene and makes it more interesting to watch.

Exercise - This is something you can do alone or with a partner. If alone, you may wish to use a mirror. Make a list of ten common activities you've done today or over the past few days.

- drove to work
- brushed my teeth
- ate sushi
- put on make-up
- made dinner

Now, practice doing these activities using nothing but a chair and your imagination. Take your time. Go through exactly what you go through in driving a car. Opening the door, settling into the seat, putting on the seat belt, starting the car, holding the steering wheel, shifting into gear, pulling out of a parking space, driving through traffic, listening to the radio or putting in a CD or hooking up your iPod, etc. Take the time to feel the weight and volume of objects. And the resistance of objects when they're moved.

Variations:

- If you are practicing with other people, take turns demonstrating the activities without letting the other people know beforehand what the activity is. See if they can guess.
- Focus on objects. How many ways are there to use a phone, read a book, sip a drink, write a letter, put on make-up, etc. If you are with other improvisers, once you create the object, pass it to them and then they have to transform it into the new version of the same activity.

Exercises - Yes, And...

This will require an improv buddy. Now, that you are able to jam on establishing scenes, let's work on making them go somewhere. The best technique for this is the Golden Rule (there are no rules in improv, but, if

there were, this would be number one!) known as “Yes, And-“ Whatever your scene partner says, you enthusiastically agree and add to it.

A - “I brought you an orange.”

B - “I love oranges! I’m going to eat the hell out of it, right now! Nom-nom-nom!”

A - “I love watching you eat oranges! That’s why I brought a whole bushel! And a chair!”

B - “This is the best day of my life! The only thing that could possibly make it better is if we were both eating oranges in a spaceship.”

A - “I didn’t tell you? I brought my spaceship. Let’s go!”

Yes, it can get really silly. But it’s also a lot of fun to do and a lot of fun to watch. People like hearing “yes.”

Emotional Investment

Audiences care when characters care. If the scene is about someone who doesn’t want to be there or doesn’t care about how things turn out, it’s difficult for the audience to get engaged. They want someone or something to root for. Emotions are gasoline for your scene. It’s not what your scene partners say; it’s how you react that matters.

Exercise - Do a series of three-line scenes. Whoever initiates the scene has to come in with a strong emotion. The person they are talking to has to have an even stronger emotional reaction to what they said.

Variation:

- go beyond three-lines and see how far you and your scene partner can take the scene emotionally.
- Mirror emotions. If the person initiating is happy, the response has to be joy, and then nirvana, or whatever.
- Opposite reactions. If the initiator is happy, the reaction is sad. Each improviser keeps building on those emotional tracks.
- Emotional options: Make a list of emotions. While two people perform a scene, someone out of the scene shouts out emotions from the list. The improvisers both have to take on the emotion and justify why they are feeling that way. Avoids justifications like being drunk, high or on medication. Work to explain the logic of why someone was happy a moment ago about going to Pizza Hut and now they are enraged.

Objectives

Scenes are much more interesting to watch if characters want something, especially from one another and especially if those wants are in opposition. They both want to be king, they both want to marry the same person, they both want the other to have the job they are both up for, they both want the evening to be perfect but have different ideas of perfect, etc. Characters with strong objectives also help you find the end of your scene. The main characters either get what they want or get what they deserve.

Exercise - Practice having wants in three line scenes. Players are given an environment and activity. Make sure the wants are about the other person. “I want to finish raking.” is not as strong as “I want to finish raking so I can take you and throw you onto a pile of leaves and eat your face. Romantically, I mean.”

Variations:

- Write a list of wants on slips of paper. Things like: borrow money, go on date, be loved, have sex, etc. Players randomly pick wants before going into a scene. Their job is to go for what they want without expressly asking for it. They must only deal in hints.
- On your own, spend a day tracking what you want. Coffee, a hug, peace of mind, more money, etc.

Elaine May is famous for having said, "When in doubt, seduce." There's truth to this, but it also means, you may have run out of ideas and seduction is a last resort. There are many things you might want from another person in a scene other than sex. If every scene is about this, it will get old. Audiences connect to things they have also wanted in life: a better job, a better marriage, a better relationship with a parent, etc.

Exploring these basic human wants will enrich your scenes. And if your scene does become about sex, keep it grounded in reality. Sadly, we don't all live the life as depicted in pornography. There's awkwardness, there's shyness, there's risk taking, there are consequences, etc.

About the Author:

Joe Janes teaches sketch and improv comedy at the Second City Training Center and Columbia University in Chicago.

Improvising Comedic Characters

How To Improvise Hilarious Stage Personas
-workbook-

Just like as mentioned in the *Writing Comic Characters* workbook, characters work when people recognize them from their own lives. Someone they know, have seen before or have had a run-in with. Refer to that workbook's opening to see a more detailed explanation

In this workbook, we'll cover a few exercises you can do to improvise enduring comic characters. We'll look at the components that make a character more than a slight caricature. Characters that you can revisit and put into multiple situations.

--Advice from the Green Room--

There's nothing wrong with characters that are essentially a one-note joke. But use them sparingly. The flirty nun, the angry clown, the alcoholic life coach – all fun stuff, but probably not worth expanding on. If you use them, keep it short. A complaint about SNL is scenes that go on too long. This is usually because we get the joke of the character really quick and to have the scene go on for four minutes is beating it to death.

From The Outside In

While improvising, one does not have the time to sit down and work out the history of a character. Where an actor will sit down with a script and might even write a biography about their character, the improviser does not have the time or the luxury.

Improvisers approach scenes like a sculptor might approach a slab of granite. The statue is already there; your job is to clear away the stuff that's not the statue. One of the best ways to find your character in a scene is to move.

Exercise - You can do this exercise on your own in your living room or with a group in a classroom. Walk around the space. Imagine as you walk that you encounter different obstacles to being able to walk freely.

- You are walking in mud.
- You are walking knee deep in water.
- You are walking on marshmallows.
- You are walking on the bottom of the ocean.
- You are walking barefoot on hot concrete.

Use your imagination and come up with more.

For each element you walk through, imagine that how you are walking is exactly how a real person might move. Why are they moving this way? Are they overweight? An athlete? Infirm or somehow disabled? Were they born with one leg longer than the other?

Make a decision as to why they walk the way they walk and start talking. Not talking to anyone specific. Always start with “My name is...”

Example:

While walking through Jell-O, I might say, “My name is Alfred Domino. I’m on my way to the pharmacist to get a refill on my medication the doctor says I need to take. I don’t even remember why, but I don’t want to find out what happens if I don’t take it. My wife will kill me if I come home without it. She’s always harping on me to take my medicine and not to whine about it...”

As you talk, begin to flesh out what’s going on with the character. Where are they coming from, where are they going to? What’s on their mind? Who’s important in their life?

Variations:

- Walk as different animals might walk if they were human – a spider, a lion, an elephant, etc
- Walk as if different parts of your body are made of different elements – legs made of glass, arms made of spaghetti, head made of cheese, feet made of rubber, etc.

TIP: While improvising a scene, a quick way to figure out who you are is to move. You’re more likely to discover emotions and opinions by getting into action. When in doubt, move!

Real People, Made Up Characters

One of the best resources for you for creating characters is the people around you. From family members to people you see on the bus or at the grocery store.

Exercise - Carry a notepad with you and note the people you encounter throughout the day

- Spoke to mom on the phone
- Picked up dry cleaners
- Gave a homeless guy a dollar
- Sucked up to my boss
- Saw a guy eating soup in the park

The next time you improvise, use these people as role models for your characters in scenes. How will you respond and react in a scene if you play it like your mother would, regardless of your gender or age in the scene? How does that homeless guy view the world and how will my character, who is not homeless, respond and react if he or she feels the same way?

It’s not about imitation, although that can help. It’s about trying to see the world from another person’s perspective and using that to create your improvised character.

Variations:

- Use people in the news or celebrities, but ditch trying to do an impression. Take on their attitudes, their physicality, but don’t try to imitate their voice, unless you want to be portraying that celebrity. If you want to create a character, use the other elements, but use your own voice or a variation of your own voice.

Point-of-View Is Everything

Characters have a specific way they look at the world. Having a clear point-of-view, or motto for your character’s philosophy, makes your character clear and strong. It also gives you a place to operate from as an improviser.

Exercise - Write down a list of song titles that denote a point-of-view or attitude

- Bad To The Bone
- I'm Walking On Sunshine
- I'm A Loser
- I Want You
- Girls Just Want To Have Fun
- I Am A Man Of Constant Sorrow

Having a song title in the back of your mind is like planting a seed for developing your character in a scene. Someone who's "Bad To The Bone" is going to react to your scene partner cooking dinner differently than someone who "Can't Get Enough Of You."

Emotional Reactions

Audiences don't want to watch scenes involving people who don't care or don't want to be there. They want to see people fighting for their lives, literally and figuratively. As an improviser it's safe to play someone who's not very emotional. It's also boring. Safe is boring.

While improvising a scene, take emotional risks. They will lead you to discovering who your character is. In a scene, your husband or wove brings home a pizza for dinner. That's a fairly mundane action. But if your response is to cry, then it will lead you to discovering why your character is crying.

Variations:

- Mirror emotions and trump them. If your scene partner is happy, being ecstatic.
- Opposite reactions. If the initiator is happy, be sad and keep playing the opposite of whatever they play. And be sure to justify the swings beyond "crazy" or "on meds." Legitimately justifying why your character feels they way he or she does fleshes out the character.

The Little Things

Most improvisers miss what's going on in the first thirty-seconds or so of a scene because they are in their heads trying to figure out what the scene is about. The problem is, the scene has already started!

The astute improviser takes in everything. They are focused on their scene partners as well as on themselves. If someone moves, they react and use that reaction to build a character. If someone sneezes or scratches himself or herself, it's important. The smart improviser will use it as a gift and become the guy who has allergies or they girl who has a rash.

Variations:

- Instead of reacting to your scene partner(s), mirror them. Mirror the hell out of them. Take on their character as their own and become two peas in a pod. There will naturally be differences because you are a different human and it will be your own character.

--Advice from the Green Room--

One thing to avoid is commenting on scenes will in scenes. It distances you from the action. It might be witty, but it keeps the audience and you from investing in the reality of the scene. It also locks you into playing yourself in a scene rather than taking on being a character being affected by the action of the scene.

About the Author:

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