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How to Write Jokes

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” –Victor Borge

“Your humor makes you human.” –Me

After 5 years of performing in clubs, theatres, bars, and a silent retreat nature center (don't ask), I've figured out the secret 3-step formula of stand-up comedians. It took me 5 years, and I'm giving it to you now. You're welcome for the time saved.

- 1) Say what's **FUNNY**
- 2) **DON'T** say what it isn't
- 3) **PRETEND** you just thought of it

Sounds silly right? It is. It's also exactly how stand-ups craft their jokes. For every hour of hilarious material they perform in their latest special, they're trying out and ultimately cutting down at least 5 hours of attempted material. They think of something funny, they test it out in a smaller venue like an open mic where it doesn't count, and they use that feedback to either keep it or cut it.

Let's start with coming up with ideas for jokes.

How to Generate Funny Ideas

- Look at your embarrassments or failures without empathy, as though it happened to someone else.
- Have a pen/phone on you for the next week, and write down immediately whatever you say or hear or see that makes other people laugh. You could have said it/done it, or someone else could have said it/done it. Either works because you can tell the story of it and make the audience feel like they were there.
- Think of premises that are funny and universally relatable, and put your own personal spin on them: Generational divide over technology. Growing old(er). Awkward teen years. Putting your foot in your mouth. Men can't understand women. The American political system.

Spend some time looking for these ideas. Observe. Write about one of these premises for 15 minutes. Don't force it, but work at it. After you have some good raw material, now you must work on building it into something better.

How to Craft Comedic Material

5 STEPS of a Story or Joke

| | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| <u>SHAPE IT</u> | into Beginning-Middle-End |
| <u>TEST IT</u> | on others (aloud & standing) |
| <u>EDIT IT</u> | based on feedback |
| <u>PRACTICE IT</u> | till it's polished |
| <u>SHARE IT</u> | with the world |

This is a vulnerable process, but it's the only truly effective method of creating comedy. The more you do this, the less uncomfortable it will be. Everybody wants a shortcut, but there is no shortcut to success. There is however, a shortest path to success: straight on through.

Joke Templates from Professional Comics:

Let's reverse-engineer a few jokes from professional comedians, looking for the structure that makes them work or the inspiration that led to them.

1) Speak the Unspoken: say what everyone in the audience is thinking and you'll seem like a genius

- [John Mulaney: Tall Child](#) Opens by joking about his appearance
- I have a joke where I say "And this movie villain is from that evil part of Europe... you can pick anywhere you like... but it's Germany."
- You can totally craft these, by the way. For example, you could *intentionally* say something that sounds *unintentionally* dirty, and then act like you just realized it in this moment after having said it.

2) Planned Spontaneity: performing a planned moment as though it's happening off-the-cuff gives your story freshness, or stumble & call attention to it

- Pete Holmes's 'Sven Diagram': "I'm very dumb. People use the expression Venn Diagram, but I thought they were saying "Sven Diagram." Like a Viking made one. (Deep Viking voice:) "Let's see... There's raping, and there's pillaging... and that's us right there in the center. We like both."

This is far too clever to have been accidental. Yet he's able to sell it as such because he says he's dumb (optional) and he moves on quickly (crucial). I've remembered this joke for years, and even though I myself am a stand-up, I actually have to remind myself he didn't make it up on the spot. The reason why is very interesting: *I want to believe he did*. The audience *wants* to believe performers are off-the-cuff geniuses, and will subconsciously make this case for them, especially when you encourage them.

- [Gary Gulman – Discman](#) Brilliant, nostalgic bit with tons of amazing details and specific timely references, yet he starts the joke with "This happened today." No way it did, but we typically feel like it's extra special when a joke or story *just* happened to the speaker. "You'll never believe what happened on the way here..." Great opportunity for speakers traveling to an event to keep both eyes open looking for a local joke. Chat with your cab driver, ask the organizer what's funny/quirky about the area where the event is being held. The less-effort, less-but-still-some-reward version of this is to *convincingly* say: "I'm a fan of your (local sports

team or local watering hole)” or to say “I was here a few years ago and (this funny thing) happened.”

3) Nostalgia: Drawing distinction between Then and Now

- [John Mulaney – Crime in the 1930s](#) Very funny, good template to raise the question ‘what was it like before our modern technology/thinking?’
- [Pete Holmes – Google](#) “There was a time before Google where if you didn’t know something, you just didn’t know.”

4) The Odd Conclusion: A unique perspective on a well-known concept/object
For example, you could Reconsider a Popular Expression:

- “People are always telling me, ‘Go Big or Go Home.’ But I love going home.”
- “Anyone ever said to you ‘I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him?’ Why are you throwing people?”

Or you could be the only one in the room to say the thing you’re going to say next:

- [Colin Ryan – “No Heroes Have Asthma”](#) People have probably noticed that there are no heroes in movies with asthma, but likely no one has ever really articulated that before. (Also asthma is inherently funny, which I can now embrace BECAUSE I applied the trick from above about viewing my own life experiences without empathy, and just focused on storytelling from the perspective of someone who is fine with it.)

5) Deliberately Introduce Uncertainty:

- Crowdwork – An interesting question, repeated over time, will give you funny responses to most common answers. You’ll need two things:
 - 1) specific questions designed to yield interesting answers
 - 2) time for the audience to think of a response

You can’t ask yes/no questions. Try out interesting questions on an audience, and then smile and look around the room while counting in your head to 7. As long as you smile, it looks like the silence is on purpose. I do this all the time. Almost every time I get to 4 someone will give me an answer. If I say something funny in response, or think of something funny later, then the next time I ask that question and get that answer I get to respond off-the-cuff in a hilarious way.

- Hecklers – What comedians call a “heckler” (and normal people call an interruption) is not so much an adversary but a great opportunity in disguise. Rather than get mad at them, recognize that everyone in the room is on *your* side, not the interrupter’s. (S)he says something rude or awkward or irrelevant, and then every head swivels to you to see how you’ll deal with it. In other words, your interrupter has just introduced the tension that exists right before every punch line, setting you up for the win. And here’s the best part: if you are even vaguely funny, you’ll win.

I had a woman yell out in a show “I hate Facebook.” And I paused, shrugged, and said, “Thank you for sharing.” It brought the house down. Not because it was particularly funny or creative, but because the audience was on my side, and it seemed like I pulled a great response out of thin air. Performing is hard enough – it’s nice getting graded on a curve sometimes.