RAINDANCE

COMEDY WRITING

An e-book for aspiring comedy writers

edited by Jack Ashley
Comedy

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Introduction

We are well into the 21st century and comedy films and television are in abundance, and some would say an oversaturation. Maybe you’re a comedy writer, director or actor and are hitting the same bland dead ends in your work? Enjoying humour is a historically universal theme, yet when sitting down at your desk with your coffee, laptop at the ready and you’re about to write a comedic masterpiece, why is it that we over-process and over calculate humour?

Attempting to gather up your awkward personal experiences: Loosing your dog in the park, ruining that first date, tripping over a cable and knocking things over or some extremely ironic scenario – doesn’t always translate to the big screen. How do you make us care, and more so how can we find you funny?

With this e-book we aim to provide you with some first hand knowledge from sources that have hands on experience of what its like in the comedy biz.
Thoughts of the Sit Down Comedian

By Alice Tomlinson

What does it mean to make somebody laugh? YOU know you’re hilarious, but Comedy, as a genre, is hard. Going into the specific tastes of somebody’s humour is convoluted and confusing territory, one that is, too often, dismissed with cheap and easy jokes. Successful comedy writing today includes an intricate understanding of comedic beats, conventional structure and perfectly driven dialogue. It is easy to think yourself funny, it’s far more difficult to convince others through a big screen.

What’s interesting to look at when it comes to comedy is its origins. Shakespearean ‘Comedies’ for example are determined by a ‘happy ending’- usually a wedding- and are more generally identifiable through their light-hearted tone and style, much like modern day rom-coms. The necessity of getting hearty laughs in this case is shown to be left somewhat to the side in amongst the progression to contentment and justice. Despite the fact that the jokes in Shakespeare’s comedies still transcend to contemporary audiences through themes and characters (think RSC if no films with a Shakespearean story plot spring to mind) the works themselves are not remembered specifically for their comedic value.

The origins of comedy on screen start with 1895 silent films for television, which, with the absence of dialogue, relied more heavily on Slapstick and Burlesque to give humour. The anchoring of meaning to physical actions and expressions are relayed successfully by mainstream comedians on the circuit today, likewise in films that rely on disaster to give humour, as seen in the likes of Jackass, Bad Grampa etc. Whether you like it or not, the reason why these films work so well is because they break the convention of an everyday situation that audiences can relate to.

When you start to think about it, you realise that almost every means of humour relies on the isolating of a situation from normality. As in early slapstick, the physical look of being ‘out of place’ is a key trick to establishing humour. Playing with appearances such as height or costume for example instantly sets them apart from the crowd around them in a way that humorously draws attention. Experimenting through gender roles is also an easy way to achieve humour through transforming conventional character attributes. When this is combined with dramatic irony and audience understanding, this works even better.
Toying with dialogue would similarly have the same effect. A talking animal? A swearing grandma? When people say what is not expected, or simply say the wrong thing, we find their carelessness, humiliation or obtuseness funny, and likewise the reaction of the unsuspecting recipient funny too.

The progression of dark humour, from the original spoofs and social commentaries of the 1960’s into the modern world, is one that is probably considered the most relevantly funny today. In joking about matters that aren’t deemed appropriate to joke about, our laughter—perhaps nervous at first—allows for a release of tension surrounding the seriousness. Going back to our Shakespearean comedies again, the subject matter, however dark, convoluted or intangible, is approached in such a way that allows release when humour is identified.

Despite dark humour being so popular, this is also a kind of comedy that is unbearably hard to get right. If the jokes fall flat, or are too outlandishly insulting, you may find yourself grappling with not only the attraction of the audience, but also the sustaining of their interests.

As with all things, humour is a very objective and personal thing to have. It can be very specific to one’s taste, or even previous viewing experiences. In this case, it might be worth considering that two heads are better than one. When getting a gauge on humour, the more opinion you get (hopefully) means the more successful you are in achieving laughs first time around. As a writer, we know that you’ve read your way through hundreds of screenwriting books, analysed the greats, read up for the important lectures. You know what makes you laugh, how characters and plot work together and are familiar with the various intricate stages of planning your plot, BUT you find yourself incapable of writing a funny line of dialogue to achieve your long sought after humour. It might be time to consider a collaboration.

On that note, the key thing to remember when attempting to write comedy is to work with the skills that you already have. Anyone can fill a page with cheap and easy jokes that fall flat. As a writer, the most important thing about your story is how it sustains your audience’s attention. At the same time as our laughing at what’s happening on screen, we need to stay absorbed enough in the characters and their relationships in order to CARE about following them through the rest of the plot. Whether you think it’s funny or not, perhaps it’s worth working backward with the script, adding jokes in more naturally as they come to you as you read over a completed story. It is far harder to punch up captivating events in your film than adding in jokes. Remember that we, as an audience, want to root for them and see them meet their objective, the humour along the way is just a means of enjoying the all-important story line of your feature even more.
The Comic Heroes Journey
By Steve Kaplan

We’ve all heard about the Hero’s Journey, thanks to Joseph Campbell and Chris Vogler. If you’ve seen *Star Wars*, you’ve seen a good example of the hero’s journey dramatized—a young person who has greatness within gets a call to go on an adventure. After first “refusing the call” they may meet up with a wise old mentor, join a motley team of allies, go on a series of adventures before returning with a fabulous treasure.

But what about the protagonist in a comedy? That character also goes on a journey, what we call The Comic Hero’s Journey. That journey usually has 7 stages. They are:

1. The Normal World
2. WTF
3. Re-Action
4. Connections
5. New Directions
6. Disconnections, and finally,
7. Race to the Finish

Let’s start with the Normal World.

In the beginning of the Hero’s Journey, our hero is exceptional. He or she has hidden greatness within, but at the start, our heroes are unaware of their undiscovered virtues. In the comic hero's journey, your protagonist, the comic hero, does not have greatness within them. The protagonist is usually a dweeb or a jerk, or some other kind of a misbegotten misanthrope. In *Big* he’s bullied and not big enough to go on a ride with the girl of his dreams. In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors is an egotistical a-hole. In the Normal World, the comic hero’s initial state is defective in some vital way; there’s a hole inside them; their way of being in the world is deeply, deeply flawed.

At the start of the Normal World, the comic hero’s life does not work – only they don’t know it! To them, it’s the normal state of affairs and they’ve accepted it, trying to make the best of what we in the audience can see is a
flawed, screwed-up world. In this world, our heroes have initial goals which are short-sighted. (These initial goals will eventually be replaced by discovered goals as the characters transform during the course of the narrative.)

In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray is a news weatherman for a television station. And in the beginning, we in the audience can see that he’s sort of a cynical, stunted soul, and that his way of being in the world might not be working for him at all, whereas he thinks that all he really needs is to get a bigger contract at a bigger station.

In *This Is The End*, our heroes Seth Rogen and Jay Baruchel are going through a moderate bit of show business success. Seth thinks that he’s living a good life as long as he can party hearty and do more drugs and hang out with James Franco. Jay, on the other hand, is very anti-Los Angeles, and looks down on the aimless hedonism and career striving of his more successful friend. But what Jay’s not aware of is that he still wants the same show business success that his peers are attaining. On the one hand, doesn’t want to be like Seth and James Franco, but on the other hand, he’s really a bit jealous of them. Even though Jay carries more of the voice of reason in the relationship, he’s still not in a good place—his way of being in the world isn’t working for him.

In *40-Year-Old Virgin*, Steve Carell, his goal is simply to wake up, go to work, come back alone, make an omelette alone, play on his video games. To him, that’s the length and breadth of his world. And that’s what he’s comfortable with, and that’s how he’s going to stay. In *Tropic Thunder* Robert Downey Jr. and Ben Stiller just want to make this terrible Vietnam-era movie. Initial goals are short-sighted and don’t address inner needs.

In the ‘Normal World’, there are flawed or absent relationships.

In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray is kind of a misanthrope, and all his relationships are superficial. Steve Carell in *40-Year-Old Virgin* has no real relationships except for the African-American couple who he shares viewing *Survivor* with. He doesn’t have any close friends, certainly no female relationships.

In *This Is The End*, we can see that the relationship between Seth Rogen and Jay Baruchel is deeply flawed. They’re not aware of it because both Jay has kept secret that he’s come to Los Angeles and purposely not gotten in touch with Seth Rogen because he just thinks that Seth Rogen is a sell-out. And Jay’s not really doing anything to repair these relationships.
The Normal World can last anywhere from 5 to 25 minutes, setting up your protagonist’s before the ‘WTF’, the big event, the catalyst that’s going to send everything spinning out of orbit. During this time, you want to plant many, if not all, the seeds of conflict and resolution that are going to be developed in the narrative and come into play in Acts 2 and 3. It’s a truism of screenplay writing that if you have Act 3 problems, they’re Act 1 problems. If you’re stuck in the Acts 2 or 3, it’s because you haven't properly prepared for things in act one.

One of the seeds you’ll plant in Act 1 is what we call Mask to Mensch. Your protagonist starts off wearing a mask, a façade that hides, from himself as well as us, the good man or woman he will eventually become—a mensch.*1 Your characters are pretending, most successfully to themselves, unaware of the possibility that there’s a better person inside. During the course of the narrative, the mask is dropped and the good person, the mensch, emerges. But in the Normal World, while we mostly see the false front, we need to see a glimpse, no matter how fleetingly, of the person they might become.

In the Normal World, your theme is implied or hinted at. What the movie is going to eventually be about needs to be alluded to without being hit on the head. For instance, in Groundhog Day as they’re driving up to Punxatawney, Chris Elliott turns to Bill Murray and says, “What do you have against the groundhog? I covered the swallows going back to Capistrano four years in a row.” And Bill Murray says, very offhandedly, “Somebody’s going to see me interviewing a groundhog and think I don’t have a future.” Which is in fact what’s going to happen.

The theme is foreshadowed in the Normal World, and the more opportunities you can have characters and dialogue allude to the theme, without putting your thumb too heavily on the scales, the better. In Purple Rose of Cairo the husband, Danny Aiello, repeats throughout the movie, “Life is not like the movies!”. That foreshadows ironically what is about to happen as the fictional character Jeff Daniels is playing is going to emerge from the screen and fall in love with Mia Farrow.

Now you could write a draft and not know what your theme is. You could write three drafts and not really know what your theme is. But at some point, no matter how silly or light your comedy is, it’s got to be about something. What are you talking about, the meaning of the movie, what it should mean to us. At some point, either in your first draft or in your tenth draft, once you figure out what your theme is, you want to go back to the beginning of the movie and thread that through. Very lightly. Your premise, your high concept,
may be the big selling point of the movie, the engine that sets everything in motion and keeps it going, but the theme is the rudder. The theme guides you in your choices.

In the movie *Big*, for instance, the theme is, “What’s the nature of childhood? What’s the nexus between being a child and being an adult? So in the theme, when the Tom Hanks character has to get a job. He could have gotten a job in a bank, he could have gotten a job in a gas station, but thematically, it makes more sense to have him hook up with the head of a toy company in FAO Schwarz because thematically that’s what they’re talking about.
Funny is Money
By Baptiste Charles

Any film that's made you laugh could easily have been a drama. Tootsie? Oh the yearning of breaking free from this prison Michael Dorsey has shackled himself in! Facing an impossible dilemma, Dorothy Michaels asks for her character to be written off, yet the executives won’t do it, so she kills herself on live television. The end. All the great comedies could have been made into straight, serious dramas were it not for the gifts and hard work of their makers.

So, at which point did the story change course? What makes the difference? Humour is tragedy plus time, they say. Or distance: because, as Charlie Chaplin said: "Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot."

So you start writing, and what have you got? A mess. You want to make the next big comedy hit, following The Hangover, Bridesmaids, or Ted? Let’s look at some of the highest-grossing comedies, and study the serious business of making comedy.

Step 1: The Hook
Comedy is about the unexpected. If you want to keep your narrative together (and that’s true for any story) you should be able to summarize the initial situation and the inciting incident in a very succinct, clear sentence suggesting that a lot is going to happen, in the next 90-120 minutes. If you can also suggest a tone, or a world in that sentence, that’s the dream.

What Women Want ($374m) After an accident, a chauvinistic executive gains the ability to hear what women are really thinking. You’ve got the main character and the driving conflict: you start imagining that it’s gonna cause some changes in the workplace, and hopefully he’s going to become a better man for it. Add to the mix that the executive is played Mel Gibson, and you’re know that it’s going to be interesting.

Hitch ($368m) While helping his latest client woo the fine lady of his dreams, a professional “date doctor” finds that his game doesn’t quite work on the
gossip columnist with whom he's smitten. The premise may not be ultra elaborate, but if you insist more on the fact that the woman he's after is truly exceptional than on the fact that he really can get them all, then you've got what you need. The difference with the previous example is that being chauvinistic, however wrong and unnerving, is more a habit than an identity. In the case of Hitch, sweeping women off their feet is what he does - better yet, that's who he is. When the conflict hits so close to home, you know the character will go even further - thus providing more laughs.

**Shrek** ($484m) After his swamp is filled with fairy tale creatures, an ogre agrees to rescue a princess for a villainous lord in order to get his land back. What? A fairy tale with an ogre as the hero? The movie does an expert job at taking your expectations of what a fairy tale is, and going the exact opposite way, and does so brilliantly. Prince Charming is so handsome but so dim-witted. The reviled ogre who relishes mud baths actually has a heart as gooey as the food he eats. (Aww) A fairy tale where characters have a life outside the beaten path of the worn-out stories and you root for the underdog? You've got the character, the conflict, the world. Where do I sign? For more subverted expectations, wait till Step 5.

With a clear and expansive tagline, you've got a world of possibilities, you've hooked your viewer, and if you've suggested a wide world of possibilities, you know you'll be hired for sequels.

**Step 2: Clash Of Civilizations**

There's no story without conflict. That's the basis of writing. Usually, goals are conflicting. But let's do broader: what if worlds collided? The phrase "clash of civilizations" is used often in our day and age (unfortunately). If you manage to coalesce that idea within a script: your story is going to write itself.

**Something's Gotta Give** ($266m) A swinger on the cusp of being a senior citizen with a taste for young women falls in love with an accomplished woman closer to his age. That's going to be a riot (not just because Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson are playing virtual alter egos). Sparks are going to fly. He's probably old, sexist and the absolute antithesis of what she stands for. Add the fact that, having reached a certain age, they're probably both too set in their ways to see each other for who they really are. Or are they?

**Meet The Fockers** ($516m) All hell breaks loose when the Byrnes family meets the Focker family for the first time. Ok, not the best premise line, dear IMDb. Let's put it this way: a couple has their respective parents meet, and they
couldn’t be more different: hers are rigorous and uptight, his are new-age, liberated hippies. Need I say more? Yes. Yes, I do, as said liberated hippies are played with immense glee by screen legends Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand.

When Harry met Sally ($92.8m) Harry and Sally have known each other for years, and are very good friends, but they fear sex would ruin the friendship. What’s more primal than the difference between men and women? It doesn’t matter than most of it is socially constructed: it still makes for starkly different worldview and hilarious misunderstandings.

Because comedy goes beyond just a wisecracking character and a few good one-liners: it’s about the collision of people and habits, hopeless situations which will push characters to go the extra mile and outside their comfort zone. Talking of which:

Step 3: Well-defined characters

As comedy is even more about expectations than drama. So if you’ve got characters that are well-defined from the very beginning of the story, and who will go beyond the expectations we’ve formed for them, or change in some way, that’s all the more possibilities for you to make your audience laugh and care.

The Woody Allen character in virtually every Woody Allen movie: no one has ever made one movie a year for fifty years, so there’s really no other way of putting it. For any film buff, the Woody Allen character calls the same adjectives: "neurotic" and "wisecracking". Over the course of an incredible career that’s only comparable to that of Charlie Chaplin and The Tramp in terms of creating a persona, we’ve become well acquainted with him and know what to expect when we see Woody (or one of his alter egos) on the screen.

Melvin, in As Good As It Gets ($314m): in the first ten pages, we’ve established that (a) he’s a successful writer because we’ve seen him writing and patting himself on the back after he’s finished writing his umpteenth novel, (b) he’s neurotic as we’re shown how obsessive he is when he shuts his apartment and when he washes his hands, (c) nothing can make him change as he’s shown sending a cute poodle down the garbage chute instead of changing his ways. And, as the words in italic hinted, it’s also a good example of character introduction through showing and not telling. (Add Jack Nicholson's genius and you’re good to go.)
Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* ($326m): she walks into the building, comes out of the elevator and gives instructions to her first assistant. That could go many ways, but since she does so with such regal style, making everyone scatter before her, all in a cool demeanour and with terrific lines ("Details of your incompetence do not interest me") delivered with over-the-top gusto by Meryl Streep, we’ve understood that she’s not someone anyone would want to mess with.

It’s paramount that characters be well-defined, so that we see clearly who’s interacting with whom. They don’t have to be people we like, but people we take an interest in. Remember that, in *The Devil Wears Prada*, our way into the story was Andrea, not Miranda, and it becomes growingly apparent that Miranda is not just nasty for the sake of being nasty, she’s just doing her job, and her job is demanding.

**Step 4: Tone Consistency**

In any story, tone consistency is crucial. Comedy is an even harder balance to find than drama, because drama that doesn’t fully work can kind of work, but comedy that falls flat is just painful to behold.

*Juno* ($231m): the distinctive voice of the main character was well-established in the script, and Jason Reitman brought Juno’s idiosyncratic world onto the screen with the same disconcerting cockiness that the character displays throughout the film. By bringing the story through Juno’s eyes, we’ve got one of the most tender character voices in recent years.

*Amélie* ($173m): talking about idiosyncratic... Always one to go the extra mile, and aim for distinctive visual style, he managed to put a character, her worldview, dreams and obsessions on the screen, while magnifying what Paris stands for in our collective unconsciousness (and hers specifically).

*Back To The Future* ($970m): Robert Zemeckis is a singular filmmaker. Once Steven Spielberg’s protégé, he’s the one that came up with the scene in *E.T.* during which the mother goes into the room and E.T. hides among the stuffed animals. He’s also responsible for writing with Bob Gale "1941", Spielberg’s 1979 bomb (and a personal favorite). They teamed up again for the *Back To The Future* trilogy. You only need to look at the Doc’s hairstyle to realize that the cast of characters who are hardly anything more than one-dimensional, either go beyond their own limitations if they’re good, or get what they deserve if they’re bad. (That’s a pulp film, y’all.) Yet you know that the humour
is not meant to be subtle and -most importantly- the filmmakers know it too, which makes for hilarious, touching mainstream blockbuster entertainment.

Those three examples are definitely in the offbeat brand, and you may want to go for something more subdued. Subdued can be funny. Is your film a comedy of manners? Do the laughs from characters? Let the story decide.

**Step 5: Subverting Expectations**

If you let your story decide, that doesn't mean you can't shape it and whenever you can: go for the jugular. Go for the unexpected, or better yet, the opposite of what is expected. Take a look at these.

**Burn After Reading** ($163m) George Clooney is just about as handsome as movie stars get, with a subtle Cary Grant demeanour and an immaculate, charming smile. You'd expect him to be smart and witty, and that he'd get the girl. That happens in a movie like Ocean’s Eleven. In a Coen Brothers comedy? He indeed is charming and has the immaculate smile in place, but he's kind of dim-witted. That's sort of meta-storytelling, as it plays with the audience's expectations about the movie, and the promotion machine and not so much the character within the story. Does it work? Yes, and even more so when you see how much Clooney enjoys being in this character's shoes.

**Bridesmaids** ($288m): If you’ve seen the trailer, you know that this film is not your average "girl movie" and that's precisely the point. A movie about bridesmaids? Cake, champagne, and rose petals are going to flow! Well... You only need to watch the raunchy (putting it mildly) wedding-gown shopping scene to realize that the boys from The Hangover don't have a monopoly on gross, over-the-top humour.

**Ted** ($549m) What happens to our teddy bears once we've grown up? More importantly, we were so busy imbuing them with a life of their own, they didn't get to grow up. But what if they did? What if your teddy bear grew up too? What if it became a cursing, pot-smoking, perpetually horny teddy bear? We were warned that the movie was raunchy, and that it could be offensive. Is it? Depends on who you ask. I come from a country where Fifty Shades of Grey was deemed suitable for people above 12 years of age, so you may have a hunch what my answer will be. Is a frat-boy-type teddy bear novel? You bet, and it's hilarious.
Funny is... what?

These are five major, inescapable steps that you will need to make a good comedy. Those comedies took in several hundred million dollars at the box office, and that could be you. They all followed those steps. The making of a funny film requires as much, if not more, discipline as you need for a drama. Again, watching someone trying to be funny and falling flat is painful. Don’t be that person. Study the market, watch what’s being done, see what’s not being done, and go for what tickles your funny bone. Chances are that you could have the next summer hit that’s not DC Comics or Marvel-related.
Five Ways to Create Unique and Funny Characters

By Sarah Cornell

We’ve all been there. You’re handed a script, or thrown into an improv scene where you’re asked to play a “character” and told to be “funny”. And...GO! No pressure! Creating a character that is at once identifiable, the kind of person you just “know” and yet completely unique and to top it off, funny. This is an overwhelmingly difficult challenge. It can send you groping around in the darkness or regurgitating some cliché stock character you’ve seen before in a Love Boat episode or British Farce. You feel self-conscious, and “wooden”. No one’s laughing. All of the oxygen just got sucked out of the room and the voices in your head start, “You’re not funny! You’re a dramatic actor. You can’t do this!” But, actually, you can. You can play an hilarious, totally original character. You just have to find your way “in”.

1. LISTEN!

Character creation is less about creating, more about listening. In a script, what do the other characters say about you? What “labels” do they put on you? Play right into their expectations. What is your name? In ancient times someone’s name determined their destiny and great care was given to the naming of a person. So it is with writers. If you’re playing “Olivia Baxter” your status is high, your manner refined and perhaps you’re a headstrong socialite. If you’re playing “Deloris Clustermeyer” perhaps you’re cranky and plain. The same goes for improv. What does your partner “label” you as? “You’re not my real Dad, your a deadbeat.” Immediately you play a “deadbeat” light up a cigarette, throw back a cold one, and sneer “Just cause I made your diapers out of newspaper.” Or maybe your suggestion for an open scene is “ice-cream parlour” What kind of people go to ice-cream parlours? A squeaky-clean “momma’s boy” or a hokey old lady. You can even be informed by actual ice cream. You ask yourself: “what is ice cream like?” and choose to play someone cold, slumped over and drippy.

2. LOOK!

What does your character look like? How old are they? What are they wearing? What shoes are they wearing? Good character work begins with the shoes. The shoes affect the way the character moves, how grounded they are, how they feel. When rehearsing without costume, always make sure you are wearing the actual costume shoes. Do they have an overbite? Play
with your face. It may sound cliché but starting with a strong facial quirk can be a great way into a character. Think of Zoolander’s signature pout or Amy Poehler’s naive grin as Leslie Knope on Parks and Rec.

3. SPEAK UP!

A strange or unique sounding voice can be a great jumping off point for a character. Think of Ellen Green as “Audrey” in Little Shop of Horrors. Her simpering sweet voice and low rent lisp is impossible to separate from this character icon. Your character’s voice says everything (pun intended). Perhaps you have low self-esteem and are afraid to be heard so you speak in the back of your throat. An insincere salesman is used to talking for a living, so he’ll speak quickly with polished diction and soothing tones. Momma Rose from Gypsy is driven and determined to see her daughters successful. Maybe she believes the whole world is on her shoulders so her voice is heavy, intense, powerful and guttural. Don’t worry about being cliché. If your character voice is informed by these internal qualities you will always be original. In improv, you can start from the outside in. A woman with a low, curt voice might be a tollbooth operator with a poet’s soul, which is why her speech is clipped, because her emotions are so deep.

4. JUDGE!

This may seem counter intuitive based on everything you’ve learned in acting class but comedy is different. Funny characters are deeply flawed people who against all odds think they can win. That’s why we love them. But they are flawed and you must lovingly “make fun” of them. For an exercise, do an impression of one of your parents. What is it in their personality drives you crazy? Danny Coleman has a delicious time playing the sleazy, egomaniacal twit Franklin Hart Jr. in “9 to 5” because he doesn’t search for integrity or try and find redeeming qualities. You can actually be two dimensional in comedy. Isn’t that fun for a change?!

5. AMP IT UP!

Take those character flaws and multiply them by 10 or even 100. Don’t just be a little dumb be D U M, Duuuumb! Case and point, Jeff Daniels & Jim Carey in Dumb and Dumber. If you’re supposed to be whiney let everything you do and say be on the verge of tears. It is so much fun to watch an actor push that character’s flaws over the top. Similarly, whatever qualities are given in the description, take beyond the natural. Don’t be afraid of taking things too far. In comedy, you go big or go home!
The Hidden Tools of Comedy

By Steve Kaplan

Let’s start off with a test. A Comedy Perception Test, to see if we perceive comedy with 20-20 vision. Below are seven sentences/seven images. They don’t mean anything other than what they are. There’s no back story. Read them carefully.

A. Man slipping on a banana peel.
B. Man wearing a top hat slipping on a banana peel.
C. Man slipping on a banana peel after kicking a dog.
D. Man slipping on a banana peel after losing his job.
E. Blind man slipping on a banana peel.
F. Blind man’s dog slipping on a banana peel. And
G. Man slipping on a banana peel, and dying.

So, you have these seven sentences, word-pictures that contain no hidden meanings or narratives. Now answer these four questions: Which of these statements is the funniest? The least funny? The most comic? And which one is the least comic? Now one of you might be thinking to yourself, “Comic and funny—isn’t that the same thing?” Excellent question, thanks for asking. But just for now, let’s stick to selecting which one you think is the funniest, the least funny, the most comic and the least comic.

Let’s start with the funniest. Which one did you pick?
A.) Man slipping on a banana peel? How about
C.) Man kicking a dog or
D.) Man losing his job? (OK, that one only a boss could find funny.)
Was your choice E.) Blind Man? (And if it was, shame on you! You’re sick, you know that?)

So, which did you decide was the funniest? The answer to which is funniest is, of course . . . you’re right, no matter which one you picked! Don’t you feel affirmed? You were right because the difference between what’s funny and what’s comic is that funny is subjective. If you’re laughing at it, to you, that’s funny. End of story. End debate. Period. If you’re laughing at it, it’s funny to you. And by the same token, if you’re not laughing at it, no matter how learned a review in The New Yorker, to you, it’s not funny. I have a three-year-old nephew. And if I took like my keys and started shaking my keys, I can make him laugh. So to him, that’s funny. But would you give me $600,000 against a million option to buy those set of keys?
One of the biggest mistakes that writers make is that they’re worried whether the script is funny or not funny. But funny, as we’ve said, is subjective. What comedians will tell you is that you can’t live or die by whether this person or that person laughs. You have to do your material and just trust that it’s creating a comic picture, a comic portrait, and that comedy is not predicated on how many jokes there are on the page. The worst sitcom you can think of, the worst comic movie, the worst Rom-com, is chock full of moments that they’re trying to make funny.

So what’s comedy? In my seminar, we watch a lot of comedy clips, but one of the most important clips we watch is from a daytime soap opera. When I show it, occasionally people laugh. Taken out of context it’s pretty funny. OK, it’s very funny. But why would we want to watch a soap to learn about comedy? Here’s the thing: Everybody involved in this—as writers, directors, actors, designers and craftsmen—is usually dedicated to not making you laugh. So I think it’s instructive to pay attention to what are they doing and the choices they’re making. Take a look at almost any soap scene. The first thing you have to notice about people in soaps is that they’re more than just good-looking, they’re almost supernaturally attractive. People like this just do not exist in nature. And the combination of writing, directing and performance is designed to communicate a specific set of qualities. Even when the behaviour is extreme, i.e. adultery, murder and deceit, the staples of daytime drama, the actors rarely act in an inappropriate manner, such as that would tend to mock the characters. The actors playing the characters are subtly saying to us: Look at me, look how sensitive I am, how much I’m suffering, how deeply I feel, how intelligent I am. And I’ll turn to the women in the audience, and I’ll say, “Ladies, is this what your significant other is like?” There’s often a big laugh because obviously, they’re not.

The point is that drama helps us dream about what we can be, but comedy helps us live with who we are.

Comedy helps us live with who we are because while drama idealizes man’s perfection and the tragedy of his falling short, comedy operates secure in the knowledge of man’s imperfection: insecure, awkward, fumbling unsure—all the core attributes of comedy. Doesn’t this really describe us all? While drama might depict one of us going through a dark night of the soul, comedy sees the dark night, but also notices that, during that dark night, we’re still wearing the same robe we’ve had on for a few days and eating chunky peanut butter out of the jar while sitting and watching Judge Judy. It’s still a dark night, but one that comedy makes more bearable by helping us keep things—like our life—in perspective.
Comedy tells the truth, and specifically, it tells the truth about being human. A comedian is simply the courageous person who gets up in front of a group of strangers and admits, confesses to being human. In that if you have the courage to tell the truth, and mostly the truth about yourself, and the truth about the crazy things that you do, and the crazy way that you see the world, then you have a good head start in creating comedy. So what’s comedy? The paradigm of comedy is an ordinary guy or gal struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required tools with which to win, yet never giving up hope. It can almost be stated as an equation:

An ordinary guy or gal—Jackie Gleason used to call him a moke—struggling against insurmountable odds, without many of the required tools with which to win, yet never giving up hope. From this paradigm or equation, we can draw we can draw usable, practical tools, what we call the Hidden Tools of Comedy. The tools are:

1 Winning
2 Non-Hero
3 Positive (or Selfish) Action
4 Active Emotion
5 Metaphorical Relationship
6 Straight Line/Wavy Line

First there’s the tool of Winning. Winning is the idea that, in comedy, you are allowed to do whatever you think you need to do in order to win. Comedy gives the character permission to win. In winning, there are no “shoulds.” Even if it makes you look stupid, you can do what you think you have to do in order to win. You’re not trying to be funny, just trying to get what you want, given who you are.

Next is Non-Hero. Non-hero is the ordinary guy who lacks some, if not all, of the required skills with which to win. Note that we don’t say comic hero, but a non-hero. Not an idiot, not an exaggerated fool, but simply somebody who lacks something. Or many things, but is still determined to win. The more skills your character has, the less comic and the more dramatic the character is. This is how you can shape the arc in a romantic comedy: in the romantic moments, the heretofore clumsy or obnoxious hero becomes more sensitive, more mature. Don’t believe me? Take a look at Bill Murray in Groundhog Day.

Positive Action, or selfish-action, or hopeful action, is the idea that every action your character takes, your character actually thinks is going to work, no matter how stupid, or foolish or naive that might make him or her appear.
It also takes the nasty edge off of characters such as Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* or Louie DePalma in *Taxi*.

Active Emotion is the idea that the emotion that occurs naturally in the course of trying to win. The emotion that is created simply by being in the situation is the exact right emotion to be having.

Metaphorical Relationship is the tool of perception. It’s the idea that beneath every surface relationship is a true, or essential, metaphorical relationship. Each character perceives others around him, and the world itself, in specific, metaphorical ways. Think about the couples you know. Some fight like cats and dogs, some coo to each other like babies and some are like business partners: “OK, I can’t have sex with you this Thursday, but if I move some things around, I might be able to squeeze it in Sunday afternoon, barring no further complications.” Even thought they’re a married couple, their metaphorical relationship is that of nose-to-the-grindstone business partners. It’s Oscar and Felix, two middle-aged divorced roommates, acting like an old married couple. And it’s Jerry and George, sitting in the back of a police car, acting like kids: “Hey, can I play with the siren?”

And last, but not least, the tool that challenges the conventional view of comedy: Straight Line/Wavy Line. John Cleese once said that when they started *Monty Python*, they thought that comedy was the silly bits: “We used to think that comedy was watching someone do something silly...we came to realize that comedy was watching somebody watch somebody do something silly.” There is the mistaken belief that in every duo there’s the funny guy and the straight guy. In “Who’s On First?” it’s obvious that Lou Costello, the short, fat, roly-poly bumbler is the funny man of the team, whereas tall, thin, severe Bud Abbott is the straight man. This misconception misses the essential truth about comedy—that it is a team effort, where each member of the team is contributing to the comic moment. The real dynamic is that of watcher and watched, the one who sees and the one who does not see; the one creating the problem and the one struggling with the problem. Think of Kramer in *Seinfeld*. The comedy isn’t just watching Kramer behave in his typically outrageous fashion, the comedy requires Jerry or George or Elaine to watch it in bemused amazement.

The tool of straight line/wavy line recognizes this. It’s the idea that not only do we need someone, some funny person, to do something silly or create a problem, we also need someone who is acting as the audiences representative to watch that person do something silly or struggle to solve the problem that has been created. The other character might not be as verbal, might not be doing the funny things, but because the other character is also a non-hero, he or she sees the problem, but doesn’t have the skills to solve it.
The straight line creates the problem, like he has blinders on, and is actually blind to the problem or is creating the problem themselves. The wavy line struggles, but is unable to, solve the problem. So what the wavy line does more than not is simply doing a lot of watching. Watching without knowing what to do about it, so there’s confusion. There’s consternation. Whereas the other characters are doing something – as John Cleese would say—silly. And it’s that combination that creates the comic moment, as opposed to somebody simply getting hit with a pie in the face.
5 Serious Career Rules For Any Seriously funny Comedic Actor

By Lindsay Ames

It’s no laughing matter. Comedy can be tough. Like Chuck Norris tough. Birthing a career as a comedy actress can include about a dozen trimesters. Having delivered many such roles in my career, I can confirm some of the possible symptoms and discomforts: nausea, back pain, cramps, dehydration, inexplicable cravings and a few other unsavoury side effects that I’ll spare you with. The common denominator is this: an ill-conceived career strategy can lead to, let’s say, complications.

So you want to act, and to tailor your career on the premise of making people laugh? There’s no unfailing formula. No textbook. No tried and true method guaranteed or your money back. And if the correct steps are missed, you could be headed towards otherwise avoidable pitfalls in your journey to booking roles and building your comedic niche.


Even when armed with such comedy artillery, the film and TV biz is notoriously present with landmines that can implode your Lucille Ball or Kristen Wiig-like aspirations. So whether you’re starting out, well entrenched or ever considering retreat, I am here to back you up with my 5 serious career rules for any seriously funny comedic actor.

1. “The best activities for your health are pumping and humping.” – Arnold Schwarzenegger

And the best activities for your comedy are training and showcasing. That’s right, you’ve got to learn to walk before you can run. In comedy, you have to train before you can showcase. Even the Governator knows that. Joining an improve group or partaking in an open mic stand-up nights are great places to start. Always be writing; there is no better exercise.
2. Live at Live Shows

Okay so once you’ve learned, practiced and polished the fundamentals, meet your new second home – the live show! There’s a reason so many of the all-time comedy greats got their start by performing live on stage at venues known throughout the comedy community in Canada and in the U.S. – Catherine O’Hara, Andrea Martin, Deborah DiGiovanni, Alana Johnston and Katie Crown. The list goes on and on.

It’s important to go to shows and know what shows you want to attend, so that you can begin formulating contacts. Some people might be able to help set up slots for you prior, but a lot of venues want to see you there prior to booking you. Get a tape together of your work so that you can send it to bookers and get shows lined up when you arrive. And by shows, I include sketches, improv, stand-up and storytelling.

3. Create Your Own Vehicles

No one is going to do this job for you. As the competition increases, the opportunities are more scarce, especially for comedic actresses. Do not wait for someone to hand you a job. Create the jobs. Create the shows. It’s a more fulfilling career path.

I worked steadily to create a myriad of short films both commissioned and self driven. I absolutely know that this has helped me succeed and end up on shows like the Emmy nominated Key and Peele, New Girl, and my own MTV web series called How to End a Date in 30 Seconds or Less.

By working with other comedians and having peers see my work, the opportunity to work at MTV came to me. I was approached, I finance my own work for the most part. People’s best bet are Kickstarter programs, parents, friends of parents...take it to the streets. Getting involved in a community like Channel 101 helped me greatly because there were like-minded people who wanted to create and shoot things. DPs, editors... there are a ton of film students who want and need practice, so it’s best to find those resources and get involved.

Always shoot things no matter how dumb or bad. Teach yourself to edit, no matter how bad you are. Borrow a camera. Direct yourself. Don’t treat anything as if it’s precious. It will only get in the way. It’s all building blocks and a learning curve until you create work you are proud of.
4. Men Are From Mars. Comedy is from Venus.

Comedy is a male dominated area in the entertainment industry. It's just how it's been. But we are so lucky to live in a time where strong female comedians are continually bursting forth onto the scene with new, imaginative, hilarious voices.

Everywhere I look there are incredible females bringing it every time they hit the stage – names like fellow Canadians Alana Johnston, Georgia Brooks and Katie Crown, as well as Emily Heller, Alice Wetterlund, Beth Stelling, Kate Berlant, Megan Neuringer and more. If we think in terms of female or male comedians, we are a lost civilization. It's about being a funny human. Gender is insignificant.

Don't worry about the sexist, over misogynistic D-hole at the open mic that thinks he's hilarious as only "joking" about that finger banging drunk girl joke. Do your best work and the rest will come. Know that there are a bunch of women doing the same thing as you, doing it well and not letting a male comedian intimidate them off their path.

5. Comedy doesn't build character. It reveals it.

The best way to approach comedy is be honest. Figure out what you are trying to say. Figure out your voice. It comes from practice and will consistently change. I generally generate a lot of comedy from the worst things that have happened to me, or something that has affected me in some way.

Then blow it out in scripted form. Go to shows and try to assess why other people make you laugh, and what you like about their performances. Maybe you are more of a storyteller. Maybe you are more of a straight stand-up. Character work is possibly your thing. Or musical comedy. Whatever your area is, explore and try to learn as much as you can from others.

If you think you are funny, then go for it. Fall on your face. Try.