

SOYOUWANNA LEARN HOW TO WRITE JOKES FOR YOUR STAND-UP COMEDY ACT? SOYOUWANNA BE DO STANDUP?



online at <http://www.soyouwanina.com/site/syws/standup/standup.html>

Most jokes are based on the setup and punch line formula. First, the setup explains what the joke is about and then the punch line delivers the laugh (or so you hope).

Example:

Setup - "My mother is so fat..."

Punch line - "...her booty has its own zip code."

The following is a list of the primary joke formats:

1. **Lists.** The magic number in comedy is 3. The first two are alike, but the third is the opposite. ("Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire PR officers." -Daniel J. Boorstin)
2. **Comparisons.** Pointing out vast differences. ("My girlfriend's idea of a romantic night is a candlelit dinner and a walk on the beach. Mine is a six-pack and a bag of Fritos.")
3. **Simile.** Describing something by likening it to something else. ("He looked like a squid in stretch pants." -Judy Tenuta)
4. **Observations.** Pointing out how absurd everyday life is. ("You can't have everything. I mean, where would you put it?" -Steven Wright)
5. **Mimicking.** Making fun of someone by acting like him/her. (Your interfering mom, your whiny significant other, your pesky parole officer .)
6. **Callback.** A joke with a punch line that refers to a joke you did earlier ("I was going to send my mom a letter, but I couldn't remember her booty's zip code.")

Yeah, yeah, you're pretty funny. But it's one thing to make some of your slightly buzzed friends laugh at a party. It's a whole other ballgame to get on a stage in front of an audience and do stand-up comedy. To do **any** kind of live performance, you need to have a strong ego and nerves of steel. To do stand-up comedy, you need to be virtually insane. Almost everybody bombs their first time ("bombing" means that you didn't make 'em laugh . . . in the world of stand-up, that's not good).

There's a common misconception that stand-up comics do nothing all day and tell little stories to drunken audiences at night. It's A LOT tougher than that. Stand-up comics spend hours every day working on and perfecting their routines, and they have to be able to read their audience to know exactly what kind of humor they'll respond to. Before you go stand in front of the infamous brick wall, you will need some guidance.

Before even thinking of a joke, you need to build up your comic vocabulary. Here are a couple of easy ones for starters:

To kill To do really well. The audience loves you. **To bomb** To do really badly. This is where there is a danger of tomato peltage. **Dying** The process of bombing. **Set** Your collection of jokes. A noun. (E.g., "I just memorized my set.") **Setup** The explanation part of a joke. It's the part of the joke that you're not supposed to laugh at. The exposition of a situation or story. **Punch line** The funny part of a joke. What you're supposed to laugh at. **Heckler** Someone in the audience who talks and interrupts a comedian in an insulting way, in attempt to make the comedian bomb. **Blue** When a comic is "blue," it means that he/she is using dirty language and/or talking about sexual (or adult jokes) in an explicit way.

Now that you can talk the talk, follow our advice and you'll be on your way to killing audiences with your stand-up routine in no time. Either that or you'll be pelted with rotten tomatoes. Let's hope it's the former.

1. STUDY THE PROS

How bad can this homework be? All you have to do is watch a bunch of comics performing their acts. But don't stop at just watching your favorites. Whether on stage, [TV](#), or videotape, watch as many comics as you can. Study their techniques and get a feel for how they construct their jokes.

Wait, wait, but isn't that . . . *copying*? Our response: whoever said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery was obviously not in the stand-up business. True, the biggest sin in comedy is to steal another comic's jokes. However, for learning purposes only, it's OK to take the jokes of a comic you really like and try to rewrite them in a different way. Of course, you would never perform any of the variations you came up with, because that would still be considered stealing. And stealing is naughty.

While studying the pros, try to determine what type of comic each one is. Just a few types to be on the lookout for:

- observational comics

examples: Jerry Seinfeld, Janeane Garofalo

- topical comics

examples: Dennis Miller, Jay Leno

- character comics

examples: Andrew Dice Clay, Tim Allen

- prop comics

examples: Carrot Top, Gallagher

- gimmick comics

examples: Margaret Cho, Lea Delaria

- physical comics

example: Jim Carrey (before he hit it big)

- impressionists

examples: Dana Carvey, Mike Myers

- improvisationalists

examples: Robin Williams, Paula Poundstone

Then determine their emotional attitude. Richard Lewis is a man in perpetual pain. Denis Leary is as hostile as you can get. What is your emotional attitude? Are you zany, cynical, deadpan, naïve, or a bizarre combination of all these traits? Don't pick the emotional attitude that you think is funniest; pick the one that **matches you**. You're funniest when you're honest.

After becoming acquainted with veteran personalities, you'll get a better sense of how to carve a niche for yourself in the biz. In time, you'll naturally gravitate toward the comic persona that works best for your humor.

2. GATHER MATERIAL FOR YOUR ACT

Before you get on stage, you have to figure out what you are going to say. The audience may find it amusing to watch you melt into a puddle of sweat while you desperately try to think of a joke, but we doubt that's the kind of comic you want to be. Even a great improvisational comic like Robin Williams writes down his material first. He has his act all planned out, then he improves around it.

If you're wondering where to get your material, the answer is that depends on the brand of comedy you decide to embrace. One universal starting point, however, is to look within. Much of today's humor is personal, meaning it's derived from one's own experiences and eccentricities. Whether your shtick is politics or dysfunctional families, your act will be centered around your point of view on those subjects. What this means is you'll have to do a little bit of soul searching. Comic, know thyself.

Here are three nifty exercises to get you started:

- Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. In the first, write down things that worry you. In the second, things that make you angry. In the third, things that frighten you.
- Make a list of all your negative personality traits. Self-effacing humor is always safe territory because if you laugh at yourself, others will feel comfortable laughing at you too. If you're ugly, talk about it! Think of yourself as a safe venue for mocking the ugly, since you're really just making fun of yourself.
- Make a list of things that are unique about yourself, both inner and outer. Do you have freakishly large hands? An unusually high tolerance for alcohol? A phobia of eating in front of people? Or maybe you're an extremely nebbishy-looking man who has trouble relating to others. In that case, congratulations! You're Woody Allen!

These lists will provide you with the raw material from which to write your [jokes](#). As you go through the process of writing all of these lists down, remember to **always carry a little notebook** with you wherever you go. You never know when you'll see something funny, and we guarantee that if you tell yourself, "Oh, I'll remember it later," that you won't. Write EVERYTHING down. Even the dumb things. Sometimes bad ideas can lead to good ones.

"That's it?" you ask. Pretty much. Most of the process of writing jokes is just a lot of hard work and creativity. Comics work extremely hard all day long (even the naturally talented ones), so just keep at it.

3. *TURN YOUR MATERIAL INTO A STAND-UP ROUTINE*

What's the use of having funny material if it's floating around on post-it notes and beer-soaked cocktail napkins? To turn your material into an actual routine, you'll need to:

Write some jokes
Put the jokes in order
Decide what your stage persona is going to be
Rehearse your act
Work out your timing

Write some jokes

Most jokes are based on the setup and punch line formula. First, the setup explains what the joke is about and then the punch line delivers the laugh (or so you hope).

Example: Setup - "My mother is so fat..."

Punch line - "...her booty has its own zip code."

So with the exercises you did earlier as a reference, write your jokes using the following comedy formats:

Lists The magic number in comedy is 3. The first two are alike, but the third is the opposite.

("Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire PR officers." -Daniel J. Boorstin)

Comparisons Pointing out vast differences. ("My girlfriend's idea of a romantic night is a

candlelit dinner and a walk on the beach. Mine is a six-pack and a bag of Fritos.") **Simile** Describing something by likening it to something else. ("He looked like a squid in stretch pants."

-Judy Tenuta) **Observations** Pointing out how absurd everyday life is. ("You can't have everything. I mean, where would you put it?" -Steven Wright) **Mimicking** Making fun of someone by acting like him/her. (Your interfering mom, your whiny significant other, your pesky parole officer . . . just make sure they're not in the audience that night.) **Callback** A joke with a punch line that refers to a joke you did earlier in your set. ("I was going to send my mom a letter, but I couldn't remember her booty's zip code.")

After you've written your jokes, try to make the setups shorter. The average comedy club audience's attention span is very short. They've been drinking, after all, so they're not going to be able to follow a long setup without losing interest. They want to be easily entertained. Thinking is hard, laughing is easy. Don't give them too much to think about.

Once you have enough polished jokes to fill 10 minutes of stage time, you're ready to turn them into a stand-up routine. Notice we said **10** minutes of material instead of the 4-8 minutes you'll be allowed to do on amateur night at a comedy club. You'll want a couple of extra minutes of material to fall back on in case your original material isn't working out.

Put the jokes in order

Look at your list of jokes and pick out the best, funniest one. Put it at the end of your routine. Now take your second funniest joke and put it at the beginning. That way, you start strong and end with your biggest laugh. The third funniest joke will go just before the end. The next funniest

joke will go just after the first joke and so on until you've filled up your time allotment. The number of jokes you tell will depend on your delivery and how long your jokes are.

Decide what your stage persona is going to be

This goes back to studying the pros. Anybody can tell a joke, but real stand-up comics are funny people to begin with. So figure out which comics you identify with. We're not implying you should act exactly like them, but if your comedic style is similar to theirs, chances are that your delivery and onstage attitude will be similar as well. The difference is that your unique personality will shine through, because your stage persona is really nothing more than an extension of yourself. It's what brings your act to life. Otherwise, you'll end up just reciting your jokes (also known as "walking through your act" . . . it's not very entertaining to watch).

Rehearse your act

Only guys like Leno and Letterman get to use cue cards, which, of course, is so unfair. Instead, you must remember your jokes. So until you win your own crappy talk show, ya gotta practice. The hard part won't be remembering the jokes, but rather telling the jokes in the right way. Most jokes aren't about the actual words, but about how you say them, so you have to practice your material over and over again. Tell 'em to anyone who will listen (your roommate, your co-workers, that guy who works the overnight shift at 7-Eleven), and gauge their reactions to determine what needs work. Remember that practicing your jokes is not the same as memorizing them. If you know your material too well, you'll come across as stiff and over-rehearsed. Be open to improvisation. You can always pick on a poor, unsuspecting audience member if you're at a loss for words.

Work out your timing

We're sorry to say that there's no easy formula for learning comic timing. It's both an inborn talent and a learned skill. Try to get an initial feel for it when you're practicing, and gather as much pre-performance criticism as you can. After that, you'll have to rely on the criticism of a live audience.

Still feel the need to practice? Consider taking a class in stand-up comedy. If you live in a large city, there may be private courses available at a local comedy club or community theater. If that's not an option, see if a college in your area has a theater department that offers a class on improvisation. Improv courses are especially good for learning how to think on your feet when your material isn't working and you have to keep going.

Once you've done the proper amount of preparation, it's time to move on to the real deal - performing in front of a live audience. Gulp.

4. FIND A PLACE TO PERFORM

The most obvious place to perform your stand-up routine is a comedy club. Check your phone book for local venues, then call them and ask if they offer open mic nights or amateur nights. Most amateur nights take place on Tuesdays or Wednesdays because they're traditionally slow nights. Call ahead to find out what time you need to be there to sign up. If a lot of people show up, the manager will probably pick about 5 or 6 names at random. Don't take it too seriously if you don't get picked. Keep going back until you do. The ones who do get chosen go on stage and

do 4-8 minutes before the regular show begins. If you're really bad, they turn the mic off in the middle of your act and escort you off the stage. Comedy can be a very brutal business.

Besides comedy clubs, many bars, night clubs, and coffee shops offer open mic nights where aspiring stand-up comics can practice their craft. Once you get one or two laughs on stage, you'll get hooked. Next thing you know, you'll start tracking down any place that will let you perform. Finally, ask other would-be comics (or professional comics, if you met some) where beginners can get stage time. If they're not super-competitive, they might even tell you the truth.

5. EARN MONEY FOR BEING FUNNY

Once you've done the amateur night thing a few times, the next step is to determine whether or not you have the comic chops to go on. If the audience laughed, then you were funny. If they didn't, then 1) your material needs work, 2) your delivery needs work, or 3) you're hopeless (there are some people out there who just aren't funny, even if they are nice). The only way to find out is to tinker with your material and timing the next time you go on stage. Some seasoned comedians will actually go on stage and try to bomb just to find out what doesn't work. We don't suggest you try this at first unless you have an extremely resilient ego, or if you're a masochist and enjoy the abuse.

Other than experience, the one thing that separates the amateurs from the pros is that the pros get paid. It may not be much in the beginning, but as soon as somebody hands you some green stuff for being funny, you are what is known as a **working comic**. Then you can tell people that you're a comedian who happens to do a little waitering, as opposed to merely being a funny waiter.

Comedy clubs are where most amateur comics get their first crack at becoming working comics. Most comedy clubs videotape the amateur comics performing their short sets. Later on, somebody who works for the club watches the tape to find potential comics to "pass on." When you're "passed on," you've performed well enough as an amateur for the club to promote you to be a working comic. It helps if the manager who worked the night you performed liked your act. He/she will tip off the person watching the tapes to consider you first.

The lucky comic who gets passed on is often hired to be an "emcee." The emcee introduces the main acts of the show. Most regular comedy club shows consist of three acts. The first act is the emcee, who does 10 to 15 minutes of material. Then there's the feature act, who does 30 minutes, and finally, the headliner, who does 45 minutes to an hour.

At some point, have a videotape made of you doing your act. Working comics send videotapes of their act to comedy clubs around the country as a way of auditioning for a chance to get booked there.

There are other avenues for working comedians to pick up gigs. These include topless bars, corporate meetings, cruise ships, bar mitzvahs - the list goes on and on. In fact, corporate comedy is where a lot of the big money in stand-up is being made these days.

But first, we recommend you try the comedy club circuit. It gives you a better chance to really fine-tune your act because you're exposed to so many other stand-up comics. Besides, you probably won't be discovered to star in the next hit television sitcom if you're stuck on a cruise ship. But you never know. We hear that a lot of network executives have a penchant for shuffleboard.