Comedy Writing 101

&

Mechanics of Comedy Guide

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How lessons are organized

Most lessons introduce an idea, give you 1-2 comedian example videos, and then teach you how to apply the lesson in your own material.

Lessons on the writing process begin by introducing a step, explaining its purpose, showing you how to apply it to your own material, and then showing you how Jared applied it to his material. Walkthroughs are located at the end.

Some online lessons include an optional feedback quiz at the bottom of the lesson. Please consider filling out the form. It takes about 30 seconds and the feedback is used to improve the course. If you are using the PDF version, you can leave feedback here.
Section 1

Comedy Writing 101
Comedic Styles and Basic Joke Structure
Styles of Writing
The Strengths & Weaknesses of Different Comedy Styles

In this lesson, I’ll introduce you to various styles of comedy and give you a few examples of each style in action.

Video Link: Comedy Styles PowerPoint Lesson

Here’s what you need to know before we dive in:

You do not have to choose only one of these styles… especially early on. If you still consider yourself a beginner then play around with each style. Do a one-liner, follow it with a current event, then use that as a reason to tell the audience a short story. It’ll make writing more fun and give the audience some interesting variation. If you’re like most comedians, the STYLE will most likely CHOOSE YOU.
Styles of Comedy

One-Liners

One-Liner comedians use quick, snappy lines that have all the information you need to get the joke. They bounce around from topic to topic with little or no segue.

The best things about one-liners are also the worst things about them: They don’t require long setups, segues, or even logical sequence. You can easily jump from one joke to another.

One-liner comedians are typically better at coming up with joke premises than storytellers.

One-liners are very easy to try out on stage. If the joke works, great. If it bombs, you can switch back to a proven joke. You have no chance of getting stuck with a longer story.

This makes them a great starting place for new comedians. However, most new comedians find this style to be very awkward. This is why so many comedians graduate to storytelling. Demetri Martin video
STORYTELLERS

Storytellers tend to be better at expanding their original material than one-liners but not as good at coming up with as many premises. A storyteller takes a single premise and makes it into an entire, logical story. The premise doesn’t necessarily unfold as you’re going along. **Usually the story starts as a single joke that snowballs into an entire story.** These stories can **build MASSIVE momentum.**

Another huge plus of storytelling is that **people naturally love to hear stories.** We’ve all been raised hearing stories. We love them because they allow us to identify with the characters more than we ever could just by hearing ‘about them’. It’s the audience’s ability to identify with a character’s POV (point-of-view) that make storytelling such a powerful comedic tool.

The down-side to using storytelling is that it’s much harder to perform initially. You can’t simply drop a quick story into your set like a one-liner can drop in a new joke. If the story bombs you might find yourself stuck in that story, unable to segue into something else.

**Video Link: John Caparulo**
OBSERVATIONAL VS EXPERIENCE BASED

There’s a continuum in comedy between observational humor and experience based humor. Where you are on this continuum will likely change throughout your set, but most comedians tend to be pulled towards one side or the other.

Observational humor is based on your view of the world. It’s about taking everyday things and putting them into a new light. If you can identify with this type of material or have always been good at looking at common situations or objects from an unusual perspective, maybe this type of humor is for you.

Opposite observational humor is experience based humor. This title most likely belongs to Ray Romano. Ray Romano is always on stage talking about his family, frequently his twins. It’s all stuff you can identify with, even if you are not a family man. The distinction here is that observational humor is mostly third person generic comedy while experience-based humor comes from a first person POV. Either way the comedy will come from the audience identifying with you.

Remember, this is a continuum. You don’t have to be on the far-left or far-right. You can choose to be anywhere in the middle. You can talk about 1st person events and then segue into observations you noticed that happen to surround those events. You can change at any time. Experiment
with both types. The majority of us are going to be somewhere in the middle anyway.

**Video Link: Jerry Seinfeld**
CURRENT EVENT HUMOR

Current event humor is exactly what it sounds like. It deals with what’s going on in the world today. **Current event humor is a great way of leading off a show.** Since the audience knows you haven’t been repeating this line for the past few years they’ll draw the conclusion that the rest of your material is coming off the top of your head as well. In this way it brings your comedy “into the moment” for audiences. They feel like you’re being more genuine with them instead of simply repeating jokes.

Current event humor has two big down-sides. First, it’s **often low quality.** Since you are unable to test this material.

The second problem with **current event humor has a short shelf life.** It gets dated very quickly. It doesn’t matter how well-written a joke about Michael Jackson is… The king of pop is dead. So are jokes about him.
LOCAL HUMOR

Local humor has the same strengths and weaknesses as current event humor. Local humor is fantastic for opening a show because it brings the show “into the moment” for the audience. They know you’re talking to THEM… not merely saying the same jokes you tell everyone.

The downside is the quality. You don’t get many opportunities to try out local humor. Since local humor is often used as an opener, it can be a double-risk.

Louis C.K: Opening With Local Humor (2013)

Thank you very much…

Well, this is a nice place.

This is easily the nicest place for many miles in every direction.

That’s how you compliment a building

and shit on a town with one sentence.

It is odd around here, as I was driving here.

There doesn’t seem to be any difference between the sidewalk
and the street for pedestrians here.

People just kind of walk in the middle of the road.
I love traveling And seeing all the different parts of the country. I live in New York…

[CK then segues into material about New York City]
UNIVERSAL HUMOR

Universal humor is where you’ll be spending most of your time. Universal humor can be used anywhere. Everyone will understand it. It works exactly the same in New York City as it does in whatever the capital of Kansas is. If you want to tour the country with your comedy act you must use universal humor.

Local humor deals with what makes us different. Universal humor deals with what makes us the same.

SUMMARY & TAKE-AWAYS

1. Don’t stress about what style of comedian you should be. Play around and let the style choose you.
2. You are allowed to jump between styles inside the same performance.
3. One-Liner jokes are easy to learn, but almost always sound unnatural.
4. Storytelling is more difficult to learn, but is a more natural and allows stories to build momentum.
5. Observational jokes take the mundane/boring and add a new spin.
6. Experiential humor uses the 1st person.
7. Current Event Humor and Local Humor are great as openers or to gain trust with the audience, but are often untested.
Setup Lines
What Makes a Great Setup?

This lesson will introduce a few important characteristics of setup lines. Later on, we’ll explore how audiences put together the setup and punchline to understand a joke.

Punch lines are only funny relative to the setup. If the setup is weak, it won’t matter how good the punch line is, it’ll fall flat. You may have noticed when watching comedy that many times you can tell just from a comedian’s setup that the entire joke is going to be funny.

So what IS a setup exactly? A setup is the factual part of a line that leads up to the joke. It is clear and concise. The meaning MUST be clear. The setup needs to be easily identifiable to the majority of the audience because it is the foundation of your joke. It gets everybody on the same page.

A setup contains all the information an audience member needs to get the joke: words, gestures, voice, context, expressions, POV, opinions, mood, etc. It’s very easy (and common) to think of a setup as just words. Many studies have been done on communication and they all come up with basically the same number. Only 7% of communication is VERBAL. All the rest of communication is through tone of voice and body language. If you
only base your setup on words, you’re missing out on 93% of what you could be communicating.

Comedy works best when you are able to communicate your point-of-view (POV), emotions and opinions to the audience. Concepts like emotions are much easier to communicate non-verbally. Think about it. Is it more effective to explain to someone just how mad you are or throw a lamp across the room?

Make your setup lines sound as natural as possible. An unnatural setup tells the audience “He’s trying to make a joke.” When that happens the audience will adopt a “Let’s see if it’s funny” mindset. This is exactly what you don’t want. We’re shooting for natural, conversational humor.

Also, and this should go without saying, the setup isn’t funny. If you get a laugh on a setup, it’s probably a punch line that you didn’t realize or the audience is laughing in anticipation.

So let’s take a look at how to use a setup…

The main job of the setup is to introduce the topic you wish to talk about. It gets everybody on the same page. Your setups will be longer if you’re introducing a new bit. This gives the audience time to “shift gears” and understand what you’re talking about.
The second thing the setup does is create an intriguing story (for 1-liners the story is just a lot smaller). Most of the time the story falls through the cracks when writing. Go to an open mic and watch new comedians perform. You’ll notice that their setups usually aren’t any ‘fun’. They’re just connecting the dots between point A and point B. They’re missing out on a huge opportunity to engage the audience.

Now watch great comedians. The setups are entirely different. They DO engage the audience. The comedian’s setups are interesting to listen to in themselves. Great comedians don’t just use setups as space-fillers until they get to their punch line. They optimize every moment they have on stage, whether that moment is a setup or a punch line.

What you DON’T want to do is have setup lines as your goal. Once you tell yourself “I’m writing a setup for a punch line” you’re entire state of mind switches to an unnatural “I’m writing a joke” mindset. If you expressly try to write a setup then it will come out awkward.

It is VERY easy to slip into a “Comedian mind set” while writing. It will make you sound hack every single time. That’s because when we’re writing with a “Comedy mindset”, we make this unnatural mental switch to how we THINK a comedian SHOULD write. All of a sudden we put a filter over every idea. We don’t let anything get through the filter unless we think it sounds like a comedian. This means that EVERYTHING you write will
sound like a generic comedian, and in comedy we call those people hacks. **The “I’m a comedian” mental-filter will cause writer’s block every time.** Nothing is ever good enough. So don’t worry about writing ‘setups’. In fact, don’t worry at all. Comedy is supposed to be fun.

The second reason why setups are so important is because when you perfect a setup, the punch line will come to you both more naturally and much more quickly. Most the time you’re having a conversation you won’t find any place to insert a joke. Even if you had enough time to think of a joke you probably couldn’t come up with one. If you did it’d probably seem unnatural and weird. This is because the setups just weren’t right. However, at some point in the conversation your friend might set you up perfectly for a quick punch line and you won’t even have to think about it. It will come quickly and naturally. This is not because your friend shifted to a ‘funnier topic’. It’s because he gave you a perfect setup. Whatever was said and the way it was said just ached for a funny reply. **Stand-up is the same except we call what you’re friend said ‘setups’ and those setups have to come from you.**

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**Summary: Setups**

1. Setups are how audience members “construct” an understanding of the joke
2. Setups should be extremely easy to understand (clear and concise)
3. Setups should not have TOO MUCH information in them
4. Setups shouldn’t just “describe” a situation. It should also tell the audience your opinion or POV.
5. Setups can be interesting and engaging by themselves. Don’t force the audience to wait for the punchline before being interesting.
Punchlines
Characteristics and Structure

Punchlines, simply put, are the payoffs to your setups. The audience (and the audience ALONE) decides if something is funny. You’re the writer, not the judge. The first time you perform, you’re giving the audience your best guess at what will work. As you gain experience you’ll learn how to get really good at guessing, but it’s still a guess.

You should give a joke several chances to get a laugh before deciding if it’s funny. Sometimes a joke doesn’t work for reasons other than how it’s written. Each joke is very unique, so use your best guess when deciding to keep or cut it. Let the audience be the judge. Writing is enough work already (and writing is the fun part anyway).

When writing punchlines make sure you keep your audience in mind. Age, sex, social status, political views, and the like all change the type of humor audiences enjoy. Keep in mind the audience you want to speak to. Clean comedy works in every market. Blue humor only works in bars and night clubs.

Finally, when you’re writing punchlines, don’t just stop at your first few ideas. There are dozens of great punchlines for any setup. The first one you find will most likely be the most logical and one of the least funny. Keep
searching for something better. The audience will never know how many punchlines you went through to find the perfect one. All they care about is that you DID find the perfect one. **Searching for another punchline CANNOT hurt your material.** You always have the ability to ditch them and go back to your original. You have nothing to lose.

**Structure**

Like setups, punchlines need to be natural. If a punchline is unnatural or out of context the audience will sense how forced it is and your comedy will feel awkward.

The punchline is where you find the surprise. All of comedy is based on some type of surprise. I think of it as ‘**playful surprise.**’ It’s not enough for a line to contain a surprise. It has to please us in some way… and it usually does that by being playful.

**Keywords**

Along with the surprise, a punchline will usually contain a keyword or phrase that defines the meaning of the line. These keywords are always located towards the end of the sentence.
Here’s an example from Louis C.K.

“I was reading about Bill Gates, the owner of Microsoft… He has 85 billion dollars. You know what you could do with 85 billion dollars? You could buy every baseball team and make them all wear dresses“

Keywords are the words in a sentence that define the meaning of the sentence. You can also think of them as “the word(s) in a punchline that make the punchline funny.” When C.K. said “…make them all wear dresses” the audience finally understood the entire meaning of the sentence. Before that they were all still waiting for more information.

Notice I say the keyword/s ‘define’ the line, not change it. Most comedy teachers preach that the keywords should change the meaning of the line in order to achieve the surprise. The punchline CAN, but doesn’t have to change the meaning of the setup.

Keep the keywords in the back of the punchline to avoid “stepping on the laughs” (talking passed the point where the audience would be laughing). If they’re laughing then they don’t need any more information.
WRONG KEYWORD PLACEMENT

“I was reading about Bill Gates, the owner of Microsoft… He has 85 billion dollars. You know what you could do with 85 billion dollars? You could make them all wear dresses by buying every baseball team.

Another characteristic of keywords is that they often end in a hard consonant such as “B (bu)”, “C (ku)”, “D (du)”, “F (fu)”, “J (ju)”, “K (ku)”, “M (mu)”, “N (nu)”, “P (pu)”, “T (tu)”, “W (wu)” instead of soft sounds such as “A (aa)”, “C (see)”, “E (ee)”, “G (gee)”, “H (hu)”, “I (eye)”, etc. There is a common belief that words with hard consonants are funnier than those with soft sounds. The reasoning behind this (as far as I can tell) is that the hard consonants have more definable endings. They are “sharper.” The hard-consonant theory seems well supported. So just know that, in general, hard consonants are generally thought of as funnier than softer sounds. But this is only a general rule. I would never reword an entire joke just so there would be a hard consonant ending. You’d likely lose more than you’d gain.

Click-Points

The longer it takes audience members to put together the pieces, the less humor there will be in the joke. Short click-points give audiences less time to head you off. If everything goes well, the click-point should occur around 0.3 seconds after the keyword (though physical laughter
comes much later). Everything else being equal, the shorter the click-point, the bigger the surprise and the better the laugh.

**Length**

**Punchlines should be short and sweet.** Think of the punchline like a whip. You want that extra snap in it to get the full effect. If your setup is too long, you’ll lose that extra snap to it. And the snap is what gives it its power. A whip works the same way a punchline does. It creates its energy with a quick movement— in then back out.

There are three ways you can alter a punchline to make it shorter.

First, if you have a punchline that is too long, try splitting the sentence up into 2+ sentences. A punchline can never be too short given that all the important information is still there.

Another option is to delete any words that don’t support the joke. These are extra words that were most likely left over from your first draft and no longer have any use. They were stepping stones. Leave them in the river and move on.

The last option you have is to abbreviate words in the punchline. The easiest way is to use contractions.
Summary: Punchlines

1. Let the audience have the final say about whether a joke is funny or not
2. Keep the audience demographics in mind (i.e., age, sex, religion, etc.)
3. A punchline is a “playful surprise”
4. Keywords define the meaning of a punchline and are usually at the end of a joke
5. After the keyword, the audience should have all the information they need to understand the full joke
6. Hard consonants, like “Fu” or “Nu” tend to be more useful in keywords, whereas soft consonants, like “Ahh” or “EE” tend to be less useful. Consider using them, but don’t “force” them into your material.
7. A click-point is the amount of time it takes the audience to go from keyword to understanding (and then later to laughing). Faster click-points lead to bigger laughs.
8. Keep punchlines short and sweet.
Tag Lines

A tagline is a punchline on top of a punchline. It’s that simple. To go back to our conversation analogy it’s when you’re friend makes a crack and then you quickly reply with your own joke that plays off his. You’re using his punchline as your setup.

Here’s an example from Mitch Hedberg:

“You know when it comes to racism people say ‘I don’t care if they’re black, white, purple or green’. Hold on now. Purple or green? You gotta draw the line somewhere… the hell with purple people… Unless they’re suffocating… then help ’em”

There are multiple punchlines in this example: “You gotta draw the line somewhere”, “The hell with purple people”, and “Unless they’re suffocating” are all punchlines. But the last two punchlines are taglines because they use the last punchline as their setup. If you were to take the last tagline “Unless their suffocating” and replace the original punchline of “You gotta draw the line somewhere” then the joke wouldn’t make sense. It’s because taglines are not substitutes for punchlines… they work off them.
Don’t think that just because an audience is laughing means you need to start an entirely new joke. You can see from the example that Hedberg got several high quality jokes from the same setup. This allowed him to get more, high quality laughs per minute than he would have been able to if he started a new joke after the punchline “You gotta draw the line somewhere.”

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**Summary: Taglines**

1. Taglines are punchlines on top of punchlines
2. Taglines aren’t just “alternate punchlines.” They use the last punchline as a setup.
Section 2

The Mechanics of Humor
From Conventional Jokes to Comedic Stories

This section will go over how humor is created in both conventional jokes and through comedic conflict.
Comedic conflict and joke-telling are not completely inseparable. A joke is simply a setup/punchline structure that is designed to create a comedic conflict. **All jokes create comedic conflict, but not all comedic conflict is created from jokes.** Understanding comedic conflict greatly increases your repertoire as a comedian.

The audience isn’t passive in stand-up comedy. **It takes a lot of effort to get a joke.** This is why comedy shows generally only last around 90 minutes or less. When shows go longer the audience tends to be less attentive because they are too tired.

When someone is “getting a joke” he or she goes through three steps, in order:

1. **Constructing** (understanding the setup or situation)
2. **Reckoning** (recognizing a problem or inconsistency)
3. **Resolving** (fixing the problem).
Constructing

Constructing is how the audience builds an understanding of a joke. As the audience listens to a joke, they take all the information (the comedian’s words, gestures, voice inflections, situation, etc.) and try to put it all together in a meaningful way. For example, take this setup (we’ll add the punchline later):

A woman gets on a bus with her baby.

The bus driver says:
‘Ugh, that’s the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen!’

The woman walks to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming.

She says to a man next to her: ‘The driver just insulted me!’

The man says: ‘You go up there and tell him off.

Go on, I’ll hold your …

While you were reading this joke, you were “constructing” an understanding of it in your mind. You did this by picking out the information that seemed important. Since you (presumably) didn’t know what the punchline would be, you couldn’t be sure what information was actually going to be important until the joke ended. What you deemed important might have looked something like this:
A **woman** gets on a **bus** with her **baby**.

The bus **driver says**:

‘**Ugh, that’s the ugliest baby** I’ve ever seen!’

The woman walks to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming.

She **says to a man** next to her: ‘**The driver just insulted me!**’

**The man says:** ‘You go up there and tell him off.

**Go on, I’ll hold your …**

Just by remembering the bold words in the joke, you could probably turn around and tell someone this joke yourself. You might switch around a few words, but the **bold words carry all the important information for the joke**.

As you constructed the joke, **you started building predictions**. Those predictions allow for comedic conflict, which we’ll get to a little later. While you were reading the last line, you probably automatically filled in the last sentence to say “Go on, I’ll hold your baby” because that’s what we would expect the man to say.
Reckoning

Reckoning is **what makes a joke into a joke**. The audience recognizes an inconsistency or a problem with their original understanding of the story – their prediction was wrong. The incorrect prediction forces the audience to rethink the setup. For example:

*A dyslexic man walks into a*

*bra*…

The word “bra” breaks your prediction. You’ve heard enough “A man walks into a bar” jokes in the past to know what should have been said. **When you hear “bra” instead of “bar” you recognize a problem.** It’s only after solving that problem in step 3 (“Oh… He’s dyslexic.”) that you get the joke.

*A woman gets on a bus with her baby.*

*The bus driver says:*

‘*Ugh, that’s the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen!*’

*The woman walks to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming.*

*She says to a man next to her: ‘The driver just insulted me!’*

*The man says: ‘You go up there and tell him off. Go on, I’ll hold your monkey for you.’*
The word (or words) that cause the shift are **keywords**. In these two jokes, the keywords are “bra” and “monkey.” If you replaced the word “monkey” with “baby,” then this is a pretty straightforward story. It doesn’t become a “bad joke,” it stops being a joke at all.

But when you get to the word “monkey,” **you have to figure out why the man said “monkey” instead of “baby.”** This causes the shift. You must now search for a new way of understanding the story that makes sense.

**Keywords are a make-or-break moment for the joke.** There’s a very clear before and after. Once you get to the keyword, there’s nothing left to do. The audience has all the information necessary for the laugh.
Resolving

During the construction of a conventional joke, we gathered information about the joke and created a prediction. Moving into the reckoning phase, we learned that our prediction (or representation) was wrong. Resolving the joke is the last step. It answers the question, “If my first idea was wrong, then what’s right?” Think of it as the moment you think, “Oh! I get the joke.” During the resolution phase, you come to a second understanding of the joke.

‘I went to the zoo the other day,
there was only one dog in it,
it was a shitzu.’

Once again, you start by constructing an understanding of the story. You choose ideas that seem important…

‘I went to the zoo the other day,
there was only one dog in it,
it was a shitzu.’

The word “shitzu” is the keyword. You resolve by changing “shitzu” to “shit zoo.” Now the pun makes sense.
‘I went to the zoo the other day,
there was only one dog in it,
it was a shit zoo.’

Now all of the pieces fit together and your new understanding of the joke makes sense. If you didn’t shift to the new representation, you’d be very confused when the joke ended. Once you realized that there isn’t another line, you’d think, “Wait, what did I miss?”

SUMMARY & TAKE-AWAYS

1. “Getting a joke” is a **difficult process**. Make it easy for your audience.

2. **Construction** – The audience picks out important info to build an understanding of your setup. That understanding leads to making predictions.


4. **Resolution** – The audience “rethinks” their understanding of the story to find the humor.
Comedic Conflict
Understanding Humor Outside of Conventional Jokes

In this section, we’re going to be looking at the underlying mechanics of comedy. If you’ve studied comedy before, you probably know a lot of the tactics that are out there. You probably know many of the strategies that comedians employ in order to get laughs. But if you’re like most, you probably don’t know the underlying mechanics of why they actually work.

Here’s why this is so important: comedy is 100% natural. It’s what you already do when you’re being funny. Your natural humor doesn’t require a serious of awkward steps, so why should your stand-up? Throughout Faster & Funnier, I’ll show you many examples of how comedic conflict creates humor naturally and just how great comedians get audiences laughing. Hint, it’s the same way we make their friends laugh.
My job as a comedy coach isn’t to change you or your sense of humor. It’s to highlight and bring out what is already working for you when you get people laughing in daily life. So, forget any of the setup/punchline structures you’ve learned (at least, for now). When you understand how to manage comedic conflict naturally, you’ll see joke formulas and joke structures for what they really are… a cheap imitation of comedy.

So, let’s look at our jobs as comedians. Humor is made up of two components: safety and violation.

**Comedic conflict is the overlap between safety and violation.** Violation by itself is too threatening, but a completely safe space has no tension. It’s too mundane and boring. If I told you a story about walking up the stairs and nothing actually happened in the story, that would be really boring. It’s completely safe. Nothing violated your expectations, assumptions, etc. But the opposite can be a problem as well. If I tell you a story that you clearly don’t believe is true, i.e., “I used to be a ninja,” then there’s too much violation. My story is so unbelievable that I won’t be able to create enough safe space to get a laugh. Both stories lack **comedic conflict** which comes from combining safety and violation at the same time.
Think of comedic conflict as the sweet spot for a comedian. Here’s a great way of illustrating how this works. Let’s take the example of tickling. What would happen if you tried to tickle yourself? Well, because there’s no violation happening, because it’s 100% safe — there’s no tension since you’re doing it to yourself. On the other hand, you wouldn’t enjoy the complete violation of being tickled by a creepy stranger, because you would feel extremely unsafe. Getting tickled is only funny when you’re not 100% in control, but the person doing it is not an actual threat. That’s comedic conflict.
Comedic Conflict in Jokes

Let’s take a look at a conventional joke to see how comedic conflict works. Here’s a simple pun:

‘I went to the zoo the other day,
there was only one dog in it,
it was a shitzu.’

The humor comes from shifting the audience member from safety into violation. The setup creates the first circle (usually safety) and the punchline “breaks the audience’s assumptions” by pushing them into the second circle (violation). So, the comedic conflict looks like this:

![Venn Diagram]

The second understanding reveals the comedic conflict. There’s an overlap between safety (Shitzu) and violation (shit zoo). The quick switch allows for both ideas to be in the audience’s head at the same time. The humor doesn’t come from shitzu or shit zoo, it comes from the juxtaposition (combination/overlap) of the two.
This balance between safety and violation is why children can get away with saying some horrific (and hilarious) things. Their complete innocence provides a HUGE amount of safety while they say something that, if it came from an adult, would be a clear violation. When a child breaks a social rule, we get treated to a juxtaposition. We get to appreciate the inappropriateness of the comment without feeling guilty.
Violation

All types of humor begin with some type of violation. Here are some great examples of the types of violations that can be very effective on stage:

Violation of a norm

This viral commercial for Poo-Pouri (Poo-Pouri Video) got its comedic power from violating a cultural norm.
Word-Based / Linguistic Violation

The most basic type of these violations is the pun, a play on words.

‘I said to the Gym instructor
“Can you teach me to do the splits?”
He said, “How flexible are you?”
I said, “I can’t make Tuesdays”

or…

Police arrested two kids yesterday,
one was drinking battery acid,
the other was eating fireworks.
They charged one —
and let the other one off.
Violation of our predictions

This is the basis of the three-count joke formula, where you have a list of three things. The first two are normal, which creates a pattern that the third breaks.

*Three guys, stranded on a desert island, find a magic lantern containing a genie, who grants them each one wish.*

*The first guy wishes he was off the island and back home.*

*The second guy wishes the same.*

*The third guy says, “I’m lonely. I wish my friends were back here.”*
Violation of logic

Here are 2 logic equations written by Lewis Carrol that helped inspire Steve Martin’s anti-comedy. A logic equation is used to prove a point in philosophy by first proving smaller pieces. Martin found the conclusions of these logic equations to be funny in a way he’d never seen on stage before.

1) Babies are illogical.
2) Nobody is despised who can manage a crocodile.
3) Illogical persons are despised.

Therefore, babies cannot manage crocodiles.

Or:

1) No interesting poems are unpopular among people of real taste.
2) No modern poetry is free from affectation.
3) All of your poems are on the subject of soap bubbles.
4) No affected poetry is popular among people of taste.
5) Only a modern poem would be on the subject of soap bubbles.

Therefore, all your poems are uninteresting.”
Safety

Comedic conflict doesn’t just come into existence with a violation. It requires some kind of safe space. Humor can’t be seen as threatening. Look at Lewis Black or Sarah Silverman and you can see that even though they might appear to be very aggressive, there is still a lightheartedness in the way that they present their material. Lewis might shout at the audience, but the audience understands that he’s being playful. (Lewis Black Video)

Sarah Silverman can get away with a lot of material that really pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable. The reason that she can do this is that her personality on stage creates a safe place in which we don’t feel like we have to take her words as threatening. (Sarah Silverman Video)

Another comedian that’s great at pushing this boundary is Anthony Jeselnik. His laughs usually come from how far into a violation he can take the audience while still being liked. But throughout the set, there’s a calmness to the delivery that helps create a place where the audience feels safe laughing at what many of them probably consider to be horrible things. (Anthony Jeselnik Video)

I met a girl at a bar.
She said she was a brain surgeon…
I don’t know if this makes me sexist, but I was really impressed…
Most women…
can’t pull off sarcasm.
The same is true for Jim Jefferies ([Jim Jefferies- "Bill Cosby" Video](https://www.creativestandup.com/)). He creates safety with in the delivery of his material while the material itself is often a clear violation.

*My one skill in life*

*is being able to say horrible things*

*and still be ‘likable.’*

*If you take out the whole*

*(sarcastic dance)*

*And just read my material…*

*it’s a BAD READ!*

Another comedian who excels at creating a safe space even with edgy material is Amy Schumer ([Amy Schumer Video](https://www.creativestandup.com/)). In this bit, she does material on a topic that most open-mic comedians would fail at… pedophilia. But she does two things that make the topic acceptable to the audience. First, she brings a playful, lighthearted innocence to the story. Anything overly creepy would have likely been rejected by the audience as too much of a violation. Second, she doesn’t go into any specifics.

Even with a playful comedian, **the audience still has boundaries.** Keeping the topic vague helped keep it safe. Demetri Martin used this very idea to create humor.
(Demetri Martin Video: "12 Year Olds")

“You can say ‘I love kids’

as a general statement.
It’s when you get specific

that there’s a problem… …

‘I love 12 year olds.”

So it’s absolutely mandatory that early on in our set, we create some kind of a safe space in which the audience does not need to feel psychologically or physically threatened, even if our humor gets dark. Comedians only succeed when there’s a balance between violation and safety. Brian Regan’s violations are very different from Amy Schumer’s, but both have found an effective balance.

If you go to an open mic and witness a particularly dirty set of jokes by a comic, you’ll see something interesting. A dirty joke fails to get a laugh because it throws the audience too far into violation without creating a safe space. If the comedian continues using too much violation and not enough safety, the audience will try to bring themselves back into balance. Often they will let out a nervous laugh… but not because they liked the joke. You’ll also see a few people check their phone, even though they know they don’t care what it says. They’re releasing stress built up from the violation.

Had the comedian done his job, the stress would have been released by
the punchlines. **The tension created by the violation must go somewhere.** Awkward laughs and checking phones are just a way of disengaging from the tension of the moment and creating their own safe space.

**People do the same thing while watching horror movies.** When a horror movie gets particularly scary/stressful, a lot of people “create their own safe space” by disengaging (looking away, checking the phone, etc.). Comedic tension is subject to the same rules as other types of tension. An audience might laugh because something is funny or because they’re stressed. Either way, the tension must go somewhere.
COMEDIC CONFLICT = SAFETY + VIOLATION

Creating comedic conflict is where many new comedians fail. If you sit at your computer with a neutral point of view, look around the room, choose a random object, and try to write about that object humorously. This would be very difficult. That neutral point of view would make it extremely tough. Where would the comedic conflict be? Where is the violation? You look around the room and only see mundane things that are safe.

When you’re having difficulty finding the humor in your writing, very often it’s because you’re lacking comedic conflict. Your point of view is the main way that you go about creating this comedic tension. When you lose that, you lose your main source of comedic conflict.

This is why a comedy teacher’s advice to begin a writing session by brainstorming topics is awful.

It’s counter-productive for two reasons:

Any comedic conflict must be “made up.” You might be able to make it sound a little natural… but it’ll most likely come out very forced and unnatural. Anything you write from an inauthentic beginning will most likely end up just as inauthentic.

Brainstorming is a disastrous creative strategy. Numerous studies by Creativity researchers have found that brainstorming actually damages creativity.
So, our number-one job when we get onstage is not to get a laugh as quickly as possible. **Our first job is to shape our comedic space.** Often that means getting a laugh… but on occasion, it doesn’t. Our main goal is instead to find our sweet spot. Our goal is to begin shaping our comedic space so that the audience trusts us but there are also some comedic conflicts to explore. We must occupy a space in which there is safety/trust and violation, in order to establish good comedic conflict.

Stephen Wright ([Stephen Wright "Intro" Video](#)) does an amazing job at shaping his comedic space early on. Even with a very low energy, monotone delivery, he sets himself up for success very quickly. By the time he gets to the first laugh, the audience is already craving it.

> “I’m feeling kinda hyper.”

One of the most impressive displays of playing with an audience’s sense of safety and violation comes from an Eddie Izzard ([Eddie Izzard-“Engleburt Humperdinck” Video](#)) bit about British singer Gerry Dorsey changing his name to Englebert Humperdinck.

The first half of the bit is how he imagines he and his manager settled on the name “Englebert Humperdinck.” After the bit has run its course he gets very serious and says that Humperdinck died just before the show started. Izzard sells the line well enough that the audience isn’t sure if he’s actually telling the truth or not. It (purposefully) doesn’t feel like a joke.
Eddie Izzard: “But He’s Dead Now” Video

... but he's dead now.

Did you hear that?

Yeah…

Today on CNN,
I heard as I was coming out.

Very weird.

Cause it was Frank Sinatra recently as well.

[nervous laughter]

No — This is what I heard on the TV when I was coming out…

…

[laughing] It’s not true …

…

…

[serious] No it is true…

He was in a car and someone hit him… or something.

… … [shakes head “no”]

… …

… … [nods “yes”]
Comedy Writing 101

&

Mechanics of Comedy Guide

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