

# 12 Stand-Up Comedy Writing Exercises

Proven drills to beat writer's block, write punchlines fast, and think like a comedian

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## EX 1: But Statements

A But Statement is an easy way to set up comedic stories. With a single sentence, you can tell the audience the situation as well as what problems you were having.

In this exercise, you'll start with a situation with comedic tension. Each But Statement gives a context and implies some type of problem. Choose your favorite and then spend 3-5 minutes writing a story. Think about what each person might say and how you'd respond.

1. I tried to compliment her outfit, but I said the wrong thing.
2. I went to Whole Foods, but I couldn't pronounce "quinoa."
3. I want to have my own life, but my mom follows me on social media.
4. The mechanic tried to explain the problem, but I had no idea what he was talking about.
5. I'm trying to eat mindfully, but it's not going well.
6. I'm trying to keep a clean house, but I missed trash day.
7. I was trying to be taken seriously on a Zoom call, but my cat kept interrupting.
8. I was trying to meditate, but my neighbor was vacuuming.
9. I'm on a first date, but I like using coupons.
10. I went to an amusement park, but I'm easily frightened.
11. I wanted to make a good first impression, but I forgot their name immediately.
12. I tried to look tough, but then I sneezed.
13. I want to eat healthier, but I have no idea how to read the labels.

## EX 2: Create Your Own But Statements

But Statements are incredibly easy to create and often lead straight into funny stories. Now that you've had some practice with pre-written examples, it's time to make your own.

### Instructions:

- Spend **3–5 minutes** coming up with **10 But Statements**.
- The **left side** tells the audience what was happening (the setup).
- The **right side** introduces a (realistic) problem.
- Together, they should form **one sentence** that creates instant comedic tension.

It might be helpful to use a formula like these:

- “I wanted to \_\_\_, but \_\_\_.”
- “I was trying to \_\_\_, but \_\_\_.”
- “I was thinking about \_\_\_, but \_\_\_.”

	Situation/context	but	Problem
1		but	
2		but	
3		but	
4		but	
5		but	
6		but	
7		but	
8		but	
9		but	
10		but	

## EX 3: Mismatch Storytelling

Comedy often comes from putting the wrong person in the wrong place. In this exercise, we'll create a mismatch between a person and a situation. For example, we could put a really loud person in a library because that's where he's most out of place. The situation doesn't match the person.

Choose your favorite prompt from the list below. Spend 3–5 minutes writing a short scene. Start by thinking about any weird, inappropriate, or wrong things that could happen (while still being believable), then write as if it actually did.

You can set it up as a hypothetical ("Wouldn't it be weird if...") or as a "real" story ("I was once...", "A few months ago...", "I heard that...", etc.). I've added a few joke premises for the first one to get you started.

**Example:** A grandma at a rap battle.

### Joke Premises:

- She takes out her hearing aids when she's ready to fight.
- She's way too comfortable with slang.
- She's already got a rap name. She goes by "M.C. \_\_\_\_\_"

### Prompts

1. A grandma at a rap battle
2. A cheap person at a fancy restaurant
3. A magician at a traffic stop
4. A people-pleaser in a debate
5. A narcissist in a support group
6. An angry customer at a self-checkout machine
7. An easily frightened person at a haunted house
8. A vegan at a BBQ
9. A weatherman in a strip club
10. A sleepwalker in a 5k race

## EX 4: Mismatch (With A Twist)

Let's do one last mismatch exercise. This one is a bit tougher, but the results are much funnier. Your job is to answer the question. The questions are designed so that any good answer will also sound wrong. They're OK from one perspective and NOT OK from another.

List 3 things that'd be OK to say about your car but not OK if it were about your partner. The first has been done for you.

A. Car (OK to say about a car, but not about your partner)

1. Don't touch the exhaust.
2. I'm going to trade it in for a newer model.
3. It just needs more lubricant.

B. Job (OK to say about a job, but not about your partner)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

C. Electric toothbrush (OK to say about a toothbrush, but not about your partner)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

D. Your choice: \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## EX 5: Visiting The World's Dumbest Museum

Search the internet for the worst/dumbest museums and choose your favorite. Imagine what you'd see there, what personal stories a tour guide would tell, what the gift shop would sell, etc. Here's a list to get you started: Toilet Museum, Museum of Barbed Wire, Instant Noodles Museum, or the Salt & Pepper Shaker Museum.

1. Imagine what it'd be like to go there.
2. Imagine what it'd be like to be a tour guide there.

## EX 6: Understanding Humor

There are three parts to every joke: The setup, the punchline, and the solution.

- The **setup** gives the audience context. It helps them paint a picture in their head, and it implies what would be normal.
- The **punchline** introduces something weird, odd, or inappropriate.
- The **solution** is what is implied by the joke.

Take this joke as an example:

SETUP: 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.

PUNCHLINE: The third guy says, “I’m lonely. I wish my friends were back here.”

SOLUTION: The three men are now back on the deserted island again, this time without any wishes. (Or to put more simply: He screwed over the other two people)

The audience doesn’t laugh at the punchline. They laugh at what the punchline implies (the solution). As comedians, we want to place more focus on what our punchlines imply than on the actual punchline.

Let’s start out by finding the solutions to some one-liners, then we’ll focus on applying it to our own material. In the next exercise, I’ll show you how this can be really useful when creating punchlines.

Now you try:



I took a speed reading course and read War and Peace in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.

SETUP: I took a speed reading course and read War and Peace in twenty minutes.

PUNCHLINE: It involves Russia

SOLUTION: \_\_\_\_\_

My therapist says I have trust issues... but I don't believe her.

SETUP: My therapist says I have trust issues

PUNCHLINE: but I don't believe her.

SOLUTION: \_\_\_\_\_

I tried meal prepping, but I ate all seven lunches on Monday

SETUP: I tried meal prepping

PUNCHLINE: but I ate all seven lunches on Monday

SOLUTION: \_\_\_\_\_

## EX 7: Punchline Questions

Punchline Questions are the easiest way to come up with funny punchlines. Think of each punchline as the answer to a question. The questions that lead to funny punchlines are almost always “What’s a playfully inappropriate \_\_\_\_\_?” or “What’s a playful way to imply \_\_\_\_\_?” Regardless of your setup, you can ask yourself these questions and answer them to find funny punchlines.

1. Find the solution and PQ for the following Richard Jeni, Woody Allen, and dad joke:

[On a first date]

BOY: I’m self-centered and obsessed with my appearance.

GIRL: I’m from Los Angeles, also.

- 1) **Setup:** I’m self-centered and obsessed with my appearance.
- 2) **Solution:** Comedian will imply that everyone in Los Angeles is self-centered.
- 3) **Punchline Question:** What’s a playful way to imply that everyone in Los Angeles is self-centered?
- 4) **Punchline (Answer):** “I’m from Los Angeles, also.”

I took a speed reading course and read War and Peace in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.

- 1) **Setup:** “I took a speed reading course and read War and Peace in twenty minutes.”
  - 2) **Solution:** Comedian will imply that \_\_\_\_\_
  - 3) **Punchline Question:** What’s a playful way to imply that \_\_\_\_\_
-

4) **Punchline:** “It involves Russia.”

I told my kids I wanted to be cremated. They made an appointment for next Tuesday.

1) **Setup:** \_\_\_\_\_

2) **Solution:** Comedian will imply that \_\_\_\_\_

3) **Punchline Question:** What’s a playful way to imply that \_\_\_\_\_

4) **Punchline:** \_\_\_\_\_

Before moving on, notice how we take a setup, decide what we want to imply with our punchline (the solution), ask a punchline question, and then arrive at a punchline.

## **EX 8: Use Punchline Questions In Your Material**

Go through any of the short stories you've written so far and use Punchline Questions. For each punchline opportunity, first think about what you'd like to imply with the punchline, then ask yourself a Punchline Question, like "What's a playful way to imply \_\_\_\_\_?"

## EX 9: “Hey, That’s Not Right” Comedy Journal

At the heart of every joke or comedic story is something that feels a bit off, weird, wrong, or inappropriate. These moments can be used to set up comedic tension for a longer story, as a setup that leads directly to the punchline, or as the punchline itself.

Instead of starting with random words and then trying to think of an interesting angle on it, why not start with the part of the comedic story or joke that’s most important?

Write down 5-10 things that make you pause and think, “Hey, that’s not right.” They can be experiences, observations, or opinions that range from significant problems to tiny thoughts that pop up in your head and quickly pass.

1. Spend a few minutes writing your list now, but know that this is best done throughout the day/week. You’re looking for anything that feels off, weird, or inappropriate.
  - 1) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 2) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 3) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 4) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 5) \_\_\_\_\_
2. For each idea, think about how your favorite comedians might use it in their material.
3. For each idea, ask yourself, “What’s a playfully inappropriate way to respond?”
4. For the next 7 days, write down at least one “Hey, that’s not right” moment that you noticed. When you’re done, think about playful ways to respond to it. Don’t wait for the perfect answer. Train yourself to find

odd moments in everyday life now so you'll be ready when the best opportunities arise.

	<b>"Hey, that's not right" moment</b>	<b>A playful way to respond</b>
<b>Day 1</b>		
<b>Day 2</b>		
<b>Day 3</b>		
<b>Day 4</b>		
<b>Day 5</b>		
<b>Day 6</b>		
<b>Day 7</b>		

## EX 10: Word Bridge

This is a great way to stumble upon ideas you wouldn't have otherwise thought of because it forces you to make strange connections between random ideas. Use this exercise along with But Statements for the best results.

1. Take 2 random words. Start from the first word and then use word associations to get to the second. Write down each step. There are no right or wrong answers. We care about the path, not the destination.  
EXAMPLE: Toaster/Jungle: Toaster → burnt toast → trash → chores → laundry → detergent → chemicals → manufacturing → raw materials → wood → jungle.

(FIRST WORD: \_\_\_\_\_) → \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 → (LAST WORD: \_\_\_\_\_)

2. Now go through the path and see if anything sparks any experiences, observations, or opinions. Get curious. If you push through this quickly, it won't work as well. I found inspiration in chores (past arguments with roommate/partner), laundry (having to rewash clothes because I forgot I started the laundry yesterday), detergent (way too many scents, the ridiculousness of detergent commercials), and wood (seems unnecessary now that we have 3D printers). The goal isn't to immediately find a punchline. It's to open up possibilities of finding ideas and comedic inspirations you wouldn't normally find. Spend around 30-60 seconds on a word before moving on. This gives you time to think up a variety of ideas.

## EX 11: Setups & Delivery

Choose 1-3 punchlines you've written.

1. Ask yourself what you want the audience to know and feel before you deliver a punchline. Do you want the audience to agree with your opinion? Empathize with your frustration? Should they see you as creating the problem on purpose, by accident, or are you responding to a problem someone else created? Can you give the audience a reason to see you as the good guy, even if that's not the case?
2. Once you know what the audience needs to feel, go back and rewrite your setup so that it describes the necessary information and shapes how the audience should feel about it. This can be explicit or implied. When that's done, try to make it flow as naturally as possible.



## EX 12: Pauses

In this exercise, we'll learn how to use pauses effectively by beginning with a great performance and then subtly changing the pauses to see how it affects the joke.

1. In your imagination, perform a joke/story from your favorite comedian using the same exact pauses. Which pauses feel the most important and why?
2. Slightly alter how long you pause when saying the comedian's material. Notice how it changes the joke in subtle (and not so subtle) ways. Why do you think the comedian settled on the pauses that they did?
3. Go through your own material and test out different placements and lengths for pauses. Start with your best guess and then experiment with alternatives (no pause, extra short, extra long). Make adjustments until the material flows naturally.

## About The Author

Jared Volle is the author of [Playfully Inappropriate](#), named one of the “Best Stand-Up Comedy Books Every Comedian Should Read.”

As a performer, Jared was a finalist at the Great American Comedy Festival and an opener for Kyle Cease during his *Wake Up College Tour*.

Jared has been teaching stand-up comedy since 2012. He focuses on helping comedians find their authentic voice and turn real stories into powerful material. He’s the creator of *Faster & Funnier*, a self-paced comedy course available at [OnlineComedyTraining.com](#). He also teaches live comedy classes online.

## Links

- [Playfully Inappropriate \(2nd Edition\) on Amazon](#)
- [Free Joke Writing Guide](#)
- [Online Comedy Classes](#)
- [Self-Paced Video Courses](#)

## Next Step

If you enjoyed these exercises, you’ll love the full training. Visit [OnlineComedyTraining.com](#) for courses and live classes, or join the email list to get tips and tricks in your inbox, plus a heads up whenever new YouTube livestreams or classes are about to happen.

*“Playfulness is key to productivity. Both the quantity and quality of your material depend far more on the playful way you approach your writing than on anything else. So don’t try to control every single outcome. The more control you give up, the more fun you’ll have, which leads to the audience having more fun, too.”*

- Jared Volle