5

MONOLOGUE JOKES

THE MOST INDISPENSABLE comedy segment in a late-night comedy/talk show is the host's Monologue. I can't think of a late-night comedy/talk show since the days of Steve Allen that didn't begin with some kind of Monologue. In almost all cases the Monologue is a topical Monologue, a series of unconnected verbal jokes based on the news of the day.

WHY COMEDY/TALK SHOWS ARE SO TOPICAL

Most of the comedy in late-night shows, not just the Monologue, is based on current events. This topicality reduces the value of late-night shows to the companies that own and air them because it gives the shows a relatively short shelf life. The episodes wouldn't hold up in the ratings if they were rerun years later because the comedy would be too dated to be funny.

Why, then, do comedy/talk shows contain so much topical comedy? There are two main reasons, one emotional and one practical:

The emotional reason: Topical comedy helps make the host relatable to viewers. When you get together with coworkers at lunch or with your family around the dinner table, what do you tend to talk about? What happened since the last time you met, what happened today, what's happening now, right? That's why a host who gives you his funny take on the news and helps you make sense of it seems like a friend, relatable. And because you enjoy spending time with your friends, topical comedy helps draw you back to that host's show night after night.

The practical reason: Basing comedy on current events makes it easier to keep the comedy funny. Late-night shows air new episodes four or five nights a week, week in and week out. That means the writers have to constantly generate new comedy material, up to twenty minutes worth a night. One way to help keep the material fresh, and therefore funny, is to base it on the news because the news is mostly different every day. If a late-night host filled his show with comedy about personal topics like his relatives or about generic topics like airline travel he'd run out of fresh material fast.

Topical comedy is woven throughout every comedy/talk show but it exists in its purest, most concentrated form in the Monologue.

WHY LEARN HOW TO WRITE MONOLOGUE JOKES?

Some comedy/talk shows have writers on staff who work practically full time on the Monologue. All day long these Monologue specialists absorb vast amounts of news from the Internet, print publications, television, and wherever else they find it and transform it into topical jokes for their shows.

It's a tough job. Jay Leno performed an unusually long Monologue on *TSWJL* that consisted of about thirty jokes. To get thirty jokes approved, writing staff had to submit hundreds. That meant that each of Jay's

Monologue specialists was expected to turn in about twenty to fifty jokes a day. On a good news day—when the news was heavily laden with gleaming nuggets waiting to be refined into comedy gold—one especially prolific *Tonight* show scribe would write up to a hundred jokes. And the job is even more demanding on a slow news day because the Monologue won't be getting any shorter. A former writer for Johnny Carson said this about writing a topical Monologue: "Doing this every day is like taking a [dump] when you don't have to."

Writing high-quality Monologue jokes in large quantities is so difficult that you may be thinking that the task isn't for you and, therefore, that you don't have to know how to do it. Can't you just learn how to write Desk Pieces and Audience Pieces and all the other kinds of late-night comedy and leave the Monologue writing to the specialists?

No, you can't. A prospective writer for a comedy/talk show needs to know how to write Monologue jokes. Here are three reasons why:

On some comedy/talk shows every writer is expected to contribute to the Monologue. Some shows have tighter budgets and smaller writing staffs so they can't afford to dedicate writers exclusively to the Monologue; every writer has to pitch in. In fact, those shows usually request that you include a page of Monologue jokes in your submission packet. That means that writing candidates who demonstrate the ability to write strong Monologue jokes improve their chances of landing a job on those shows.

Monologue-type jokes are the building blocks of many other comedy pieces. That's because many comedy pieces on comedy/talk shows are "joke baskets"; a joke basket piece gathers together a series of interchangeable jokes under a single topic, such as "Thank You Notes" on *LNWJF*. And each joke in a joke basket is created using the same techniques you'd use for

a Monologue joke. So a late-night writer needs to know how to write Monologue jokes in order to be able to write a lot of the other comedy on the show.

Most of the writing techniques that apply to Monologue jokes also apply to jokes in general. A well-crafted joke is a well-crafted joke, whether it's on a comedy/talk show or in a newsletter, blog, stand-up act, radio show, sitcom, or feature film comedy. Writers who can create solid Monologue jokes will have an easier time advancing their careers in comedy no matter what direction those careers take.

So pretty much every comedy writer needs to be able to write Monologue jokes. But don't worry because there's a formula for it.

THE MONOLOGUE JOKE FORMULA

How can there be a formula for writing Monologue jokes? Isn't humor subjective? Don't different people laugh at different jokes? Yes, humor is subjective and different people do laugh at different jokes. But different people also laugh at many of the same jokes and those are the jokes that go into a late-night Monologue.

The host of any nationally broadcast late-night show wants to tell jokes that almost everybody in the audience will laugh at. After all, if almost everybody is laughing then the ratings for the show are more likely to stay high and the host is more likely to keep his job. This desire of every host to make everybody laugh leads every writer for every host to write Monologue jokes the same way.

Don't believe that every late-night writer writes Monologue jokes [illegible]? Then have somebody read you some jokes that were

transcribed from various late-night Monologues—you can find them online—and try to guess which host delivered them. You'll see that it's difficult, which proves my point that Monologue jokes are basically interchangeable between shows. The jokes were all designed to make a mass audience do the same thing—laugh—which is why they were all created using the same time-tested techniques.

Collectively these techniques add up to a formula for writing Monologue jokes. And because these techniques are so versatile and so powerful, they're also used to create many other forms of comedy. I'll be referring to these Monologue joke techniques again and again throughout this book so in this chapter I'll devote a lot of attention to explaining them.

Let's start by talking about the basic structure of a Monologue joke.

THE THREE PARTS OF A MONOLOGUE JOKE

In Western culture all stories with mass appeal, whether dramatic or comedic, have a three-act structure. The first act introduces a relatable hero who wants something very much. The second act makes it increasingly difficult for the hero to get what he or she wants. And the third act shows how the hero either succeeds or fails to get what he or she wants. Audiences seem to enjoy watching three-act stories, where somebody they can identify with achieves a goal despite huge obstacles, because stories like that make them feel better about themselves.

The idea of the three-act story structure actually dates back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who discussed it in his *Poetics*. Since Aristotle's time, a lot has been written about the use of the three-act structure in screenwriting. I only mention the structure here because a Monologue joke is a tiny story, intended to entertain a mass audience, and that may be why it has three parts.

The three parts of a Monologue joke—in their order of appearance in the joke—are (1) the topic, (2) what I call the angle, and (3) the punch line.

1. **The topic** is the news item that the joke is based on.
2. **The angle** is the particular direction that the joke takes.
3. **The punch line** is the surprise at the end of the joke.

Other writers may have different names for the three parts of a Monologue joke, or may believe that a Monologue joke has more or fewer than three parts. For example, the topic and angle taken together are often referred to as the setup. But I prefer my terminology because I think it leads to simple, clear explanations of how Monologue jokes work and how to write them.

Now let's look at these three parts of a Monologue joke in more detail, along with the techniques used to create them.

THE TOPIC

The process of writing a Monologue joke starts with picking a topic. The topic is the first part of the joke. It's a concise statement of the news item that the joke is based on. To give you some examples, here are the topics of six jokes taken from the Monologues of various late-night comedy/talk shows:

- "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat." [*Conan*]
- "Charlie Sheen is on the show tonight to talk about his hit TV show *Anger Management*." [*TSWJL*]
- "Denny's has a new sandwich called the Fried Cheese Melt, which comes [illegible] fried mozzarella sticks inside a grilled cheese." [*LNWJF*]

- "Bernie Madoff's underpants were sold at an auction." [*LSWDL*]
- "Carl's Jr. is selling a foot-long burger." [*LSWDL*]
- "A company in North Carolina is selling a sixty-dollar IQ test that people can give their dogs." [*LNWJF*]

I'll finish telling these jokes later in the chapter. For now, let's just focus on the topics. Professional comedy writers singled out those topics for Monologue jokes because they each had six specific characteristics. Each of your Monologue joke topics should have those six characteristics, too. Here they are.

THE SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD TOPIC

1. A good topic is factually true.

A good topic is not something that sprang from your imagination. It is based on a real story that was reported by at least one reputable news source.

It is so important for topics to be true that comedy/talk show hosts will often ask the writer of a joke with a dubious topic whether the topic is true before they'll even consider delivering the joke. And some Monologue writers, anticipating the host's doubt, will add the notation "true" next to jokes they submit that have hard-to-believe topics. For example, here's a joke from *LLSWCF* that I would add the notation "true" to: "Scientists in Scotland say they're inventing an invisibility cloak. If you want to make a Scotsman invisible, just give him a talk show on CBS at 12:30." [Host Craig Ferguson, a Scotsman, is describing his own show.]

Why does the topic have to be true? The reason is because if the audience suspects that the host made up the topic they'll be distracted; they'll be

wondering whether the host lied instead of paying attention to the joke. Also, if the audience thinks the joke is about something fictitious they won't care about the joke because it can't possibly be relevant to them. They'll tune it out, and as a result the laugh won't be as big. Returning to the prehistoric analogy in the previous chapter, if the tall grass isn't really rustling, the caveman will ignore it and won't even see the laughable amorous monkeys when they're revealed.

To help reassure the audience that a questionable topic is true you can begin the joke with a few details that ground it in reality. For example, you could state the source of the story or when or where it took place, using words like "According to a new poll..." or "Yesterday in Tennessee..." Such touches of specificity subtly validate the topic in the audience's minds. The host himself might also validate a suspect topic by leading into the joke with "This is true" or "Did you hear about this?"

2. A good topic is not intentionally funny.

A good topic is a serious, straight statement of fact. It shouldn't be embellished with any comedy at all. For example, you wouldn't want to reword the sample topic above to read "Carl's Jr. may have to change its name to Calories Jr. because it's selling a foot-long burger."

The reason, again, is to avoid distracting the audience. If there is any humor in the topic the audience will be busy mentally processing that humor when they should be paying attention to the rest of the joke. As a result they may not absorb all the information they need to appreciate the actual punch line and may not laugh when it arrives. Continuing with my prehistoric analogy, the caveman won't notice the rustling grass and mating monkeys if he's watching a silly wolf cub chase its own

3. A good topic can be and should be stated in only one sentence.

Sometimes a topic can consist of two sentences if you have to convey a lot of essential information and the resulting joke is worth it. But in general one sentence is the limit for a topic. If you make the audience sit through a long, complicated, multi-sentence topic they may get confused or their attention may wander. In either case they won't be fully prepared to laugh at the punch line.

I'll talk more about the importance of brevity in the next chapter, "How to Edit Jokes."

4. A good topic is a news item that will capture most people's interest.

The topic has to stimulate the curiosity of a mass audience. If the audience isn't curious about the topic, if they don't care about it, they'll decide from the start that the joke doesn't relate to them and they won't listen closely to it. They won't be taking it in as it's told and they won't laugh when it ends.

Going back to my prehistoric analogy, the topic of a Monologue joke should grab an audience member's attention the way rustling grass would grab the attention of a caveman, and for the same reasons. The rustling grass is out-of-the-ordinary and means something to the caveman, namely the possibility that a predator is hiding in the grass ready to tear him apart. The topic of a Monologue joke should be out-of-the-ordinary and mean something to an audience member—the possibility that something happening in the world could affect his or her life.

But how can you tell whether any given news item will capture enough people's interest to justify writing a joke about it? Here are four ways to

identify news items that may be compelling enough to become the topics of successful Monologue jokes:

a) Focus on stories that are getting a lot of coverage in the media.

What are the top stories on television news shows, on Internet news sites, in the newspaper, and on the radio? If a story is being featured by several news outlets, that means that several teams of news professionals have decided that the story will interest most of their audience. So you should consider making that story the topic of a joke.

Don't limit yourself to "hard news" stories. What about that movie that opened last weekend? That TV series that was just cancelled? That celebrity who got arrested today? Any pop culture item, if it's covered widely enough in the media, is a candidate for a joke topic.

Be attuned to every facet of pop culture. Watch shows like *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood*. Read mass-circulation magazines like *People* and *Entertainment Weekly* and scan their websites along with pop culture websites like TMZ and PerezHilton. Check out what topics are trending on Twitter. Explore YouTube to see what Internet videos have gone viral.

You could even tune into the late-night comedy/talk shows to see what topics they're using as joke material. If one of those topics seems to have staying power ("legs") you might base some of your own jokes on it. Note that a topic is a news event, which is in the public domain, so plagiarism wouldn't be an issue. (It would be an issue, however, if you copied an entire joke. I'll talk more about plagiarism in Chapter 14.)

There's another reason to choose well-covered news stories for your joke topics, besides the fact that most people will probably be interested in those topics: your audience will know enough about the topics to understand your jokes without your having to do too much explaining. For example, you could mention Bernie Madoff in your topic without also having to lengthen the joke to include the facts that he ran a Ponzi scheme and scammed people out of billions of dollars. The shorter the joke, the better; I'll cover this point more in the next chapter.

b) Focus on stories that even people who aren't media professionals are talking about.

Your friends, your family, your coworkers...what news items are they bringing up in conversation? What articles and video clips are your friends sharing on Facebook? What blog topics are attracting the most comments? What current events do strangers at a party care enough about to want to discuss? Those are all stories you should consider for joke topics.

c) Focus on stories that you yourself have an emotional reaction to.

Have you ever heard or read a news story and had one of these reactions?

- "That's interesting."
- "That's dumb."
- "That's surprising."
- "That's annoying."
- "That's weird."
- "That's hypocritical."
- "That's disgusting."

An emotional reaction like one of those to a news story is a sign that the story has hooked you. It has grabbed your interest. And if the story has grabbed your interest the chances are excellent that it will grab many other people's interest, too. So add that story to your list of potential joke topics.

d) Consider "Odd News" stories.

Odd News stories are about events that are out-of-the-ordinary and attention-getting but not significant enough to rate extensive coverage by the national media. You can easily find Odd News stories online by typing "odd news" into your favorite search engine. You can also go directly to websites like Fark that specialize in aggregating Odd News items.

Here are a few examples of headlines taken from the Odd News page of the "Yahoo News" website:

- "Woman says she found snake in bag of potatoes from Walmart."
- "World's most expensive coffee is defecated from an animal."
- "After car crash, Australian woman has French accent."

The fact that stories like those are included on an Odd News webpage means that the professionals curating the page think the stories are of general interest. And that means that the stories have excellent potential as joke topics even though they weren't widely reported.

Writers on late-night comedy/talk shows often turn to Odd for joke topics on slow news days, when there aren't

enough suitable, high-profile stories to fill out a full-length Monologue.

5. A good topic is something that your audience will let you joke about.

A mass audience won't let you joke about certain topics. Many topics are so tragic, disturbing, or offensive that the negative emotions they bring out in most people tend to overwhelm any urge to laugh. Among these problematic topics are death, mental illness, natural and manmade disasters, rape, and child abuse.

If a mass audience hears a joke about one of those traditionally taboo topics the subtleties of the Surprise Theory of Laughter come into play. The audience might be surprised by the incongruity in the punch line but they won't laugh because the incongruity isn't harmless. The incongruity harms them because it makes them think, "If I laugh at that punch line I'm a horrible person."

To be sure, some comics who host niche television shows, say on Comedy Central, do make jokes about dead children and other sensitive topics. But those hosts aren't expected to attract a mass audience and the viewers they do attract know what they're in for. By contrast, the hosts of major comedy/talk shows like the ones I'm focusing on want to avoid repelling too many viewers with troublesome joke topics. High ratings mean money, prestige, and job security so those hosts want every viewer they can get. Since the big-time hosts have a strong incentive to avoid difficult topics, anybody writing for those hosts should avoid them, too.

But some news stories about sensitive topics are too high-profile to rule out immediately. If the entire country is riveted by a particular current event, the instinct of a comedy/talk show writer is to try to mine it for material even if it has unsavory elements.

So here are four tips on how and when to write jokes about a tricky but hard-to-ignore topic:

a) Steer clear of the most disturbing aspects of the topic.

If the news story has some humorous elements and you don't rub the collective face of the audience in the unsettling details, your jokes on the topic are more likely to get laughs.

For example, late-night hosts told dozens of jokes about pop singer Michael Jackson after he was arrested for suspected child molestation. Here are just a few examples:

- "Michael Jackson was arrested yesterday. According to the Santa Barbara Police, Michael Jackson is five foot eleven and only weighs a hundred twenty pounds. Michael is able to keep his weight down because he only orders off the children's menu." [*LNWCO*]

- "Police swarmed all over the Neverland Ranch for twelve hours, about sixty investigators, and found a lot of items that needed explaining...like the wedding photo with Lisa Marie Presley." [*LSWDL*]

- "I guess they got Michael on that new law—three tykes and you're out." [*TSWJL*]

How could jokes about an alleged serial child molester have gotten laughs? Because those jokes didn't call up any upsetting mental images of the alleged heinous acts themselves. Also, late-night audiences were already inclined to laugh at Michael Jackson—Jacko!—whose many eccentricities had made him comedy fodder for years.

Contrast Michael Jackson with Jerry Sandusky, the Penn State football coach who was also accused of serial child molestation. Even before Sandusky was found guilty of the crimes, late-night hosts mostly avoided telling jokes about the case. Unlike Michael Jackson, Jerry Sandusky didn't wear a sequined glove and cavort with a pet chimp named Bubbles. No aspect of the Penn State story was even remotely funny.

b) Remember that comedy equals tragedy plus time.

You've probably heard that formula before. It means that even a tragic event can become the topic of jokes if enough time has passed. Months or years after the tragedy the graphic details may be forgotten and the emotional scars may be mostly healed. A host can then tell a joke about the event without the audience thinking "too soon" and turning on him.

For instance, people occasionally die in Amtrak accidents when trains derail, crash, or hurtle off bridges. But as long as a decent amount of time has elapsed since the last train fatality, an audience will laugh at a joke like this one from *TSWJL*: "Amtrak marked their thirty-fifth anniversary today. To celebrate, they had an upside-down cake."

c) Remember that comedy also equals tragedy minus emotional connection.

You probably haven't heard that formula before because I made it up. It means that audiences are more willing to laugh about a tragic event if they have little emotional connection to it.

Of course, anyone's death is sad but a joke like this went over big on one late-night show: "Yesterday the founder of the [company

name] movie theater chain passed away. Funeral services will be held today at 11:45 a.m., 2:30 p.m., 5:15, 8:00, and 10:45." The host may have received a letter of complaint from a grieving relative but the audience allowed itself to laugh because the founder had died a natural death, they didn't know him personally, and they had little emotional connection to the event.

This formula even applies to nonhumans. That's why the audience laughed at this joke on *TSWJL*: "Paul, the octopus who predicted the outcome of all those World Cup games, died this week. In lieu of flowers, the family has asked that people send lemon wedges and tartar sauce." Millions of viewers have deep emotional ties to animals like dogs and cats but apparently not to cephalopods.

d) Don't make fun of people for things they can't help.

I don't know who originally said that but it's a good rule of thumb for comedy. In general you want to avoid writing jokes about people's physical deformities, speech impediments, mental illness, birth defects, war wounds, and so on. The audience won't be on your side and they won't laugh.

This rule of thumb even applies to celebrities. In general, celebrities make excellent targets for jokes because audiences are fascinated by them and know everything about them. Plus, the Superiority Theory of Laughter implies that if the audience suddenly feels superior to someone more powerful than they are—like a celebrity—then their laughter will be even louder. But if celebrities are in the news for things they can't help, comedy writers should tread very carefully.

Pop singer Britney Spears is a good example. Over the years she had been the subject of countless late-night jokes about her short-lived marriages and her careless childrearing practices. But after she had her head shaved and was taken to a hospital in an ambulance the late-night hosts backed off. Their perception, and the audience's, was that Britney might have some psychological problem that was temporarily beyond her control.

Contrast Britney with actor Charlie Sheen. Charlie trashed his hotel room and gave interviews that made him sound deranged but late-night hosts never stopped telling jokes like this one from *TSWJL*: "I turned on the TV today and there's nothing but CSI. CSI is on every single channel. Not the crime show...Charlie Sheen Insanity." Hosts didn't let up on Charlie because they felt that the audience would attribute his bizarre behavior not to psychological problems but to substance abuse. That is, the general feeling was that Charlie could, in fact, help himself if he wanted to.

Fat jokes seem to fall in a grey area. Even though people can have unavoidable medical reasons for being overweight, late-night hosts routinely joke about plus-size celebrities like actress Kirstie Alley and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. Why? Because their audiences let them get away with it.

The four tips above will help you decide how and when to write jokes about problematic but high-profile topics. But how can you know in advance whether your audience will find a joke acceptable? How can you predict whether your head writer will think you're an insensitive jerk for submitting a particular joke? You could first try out any questionable joke on friends of yours whose opinions you trust, but in the end you'll have to make a judgment call. I would say that if you have any doubt about whether a particular joke crosses the line, don't submit it anywhere. Substitute a different joke.

Here's how a typical late-night show handles a tricky topic. The writers submit jokes on the topic that they believe might be acceptable. The host discusses the jokes with the writers who help him assemble the Monologue. If the host decides a joke is worth the risk he'll tell it on the show and see how it does. If the audience reaction is positive, the next night the host might perform two jokes on the topic. If those play well too, the next night he'll do more jokes on the topic, assuming it has remained a major news story. He might even do an entire comedy piece on the topic.

For an inside look at this process in action see Appendix B. It describes how *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* found comedy in a topic arising from a double homicide—the trial of football player and actor O. J. Simpson.

6. A good topic is something that your host is willing to joke about.

Since the host of a comedy/talk show plays a version of his real self when he performs, it's only natural that he would filter his jokes through his real personality. That's why some topics may be perfectly acceptable to an audience but off-limits to a host. For example, one comedy/talk show host is a vegan and won't tell any jokes involving milk, cheese, or meat. Another host wouldn't perform a joke I wrote about actor Steve Guttenberg because the *Police Academy* star was a neighbor of his.

Unless you're on staff you can't know for sure what the host's taboo topics are. As an outsider all you can do is study the show, note what topics are conspicuously absent from the comedy, and make an educated guess.

To recap, a good topic for a Monologue joke has to meet six conditions.

1. factually true
2. not intentionally funny
3. only one sentence long
4. a news item that will capture most people's interest
5. something that your audience will let you joke about
6. something that your host is willing to joke about

Let's take another look at the joke topics I listed earlier in this chapter and see how they stack up against that list of conditions. Here are the topics again:

- "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat."
- "Charlie Sheen is on the show tonight to talk about his hit TV show *Anger Management*."
- "Denny's has a new sandwich called the Fried Cheese Melt, which comes with deep-fried mozzarella sticks inside a grilled cheese."
- "Bernie Madoff's underpants were sold at an auction."
- "Carl's Jr. is selling a foot-long burger."
- "A company in North Carolina is selling a sixty-dollar IQ test that people can give their dogs."

Each topic is factually true, even the Bernie Madoff one. Each topic is one sentence that isn't trying to be funny. Each topic is most likely acceptable to the host and to the vast majority of Americans. And finally, each topic would probably capture the interest of the typical viewer. Shoplifting merchandise in their body fat? That's disgusting. Crazy Charlie Sheen has a hit show? That's interesting. A cheese-in-cheese sandwich? That's

disgusting, too. Somebody bought a con man's underpants? That's weird. A foot-long burger? That's dumb. An IQ test for dogs? That's dumb, too.

Professional Monologue writers zeroed in on those news items out of the thousands available at the time because they knew those items could be joke topics with all six necessary characteristics. Once they picked those topics the writers then took the next step in turning them into Monologue jokes. They thought about angles.

THE ANGLE

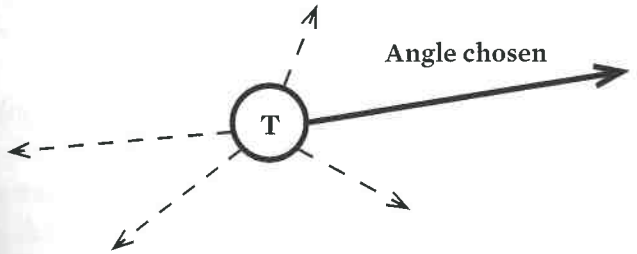
The angle is the middle part of the joke. It's the particular direction the joke takes in getting from the topic to the punch line. Like a good topic, a good angle is at most one sentence long; it may even be only a phrase. Returning to my prehistoric analogy, the angle is the equivalent of the observant caveman pantomiming to his family that the rustling grass means a saber-toothed cat is hiding there.

Here again are the sample Monologue jokes I've been analyzing, this time with the angles of the jokes added and underlined.

- "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat. The cops said..."
- "Charlie Sheen is on the show tonight to talk about his hit TV show *Anger Management*. In fact, they're adding a new character this year..."
- "Denny's has a new sandwich called the Fried Cheese Melt, which comes with deep-fried mozzarella sticks inside a grilled cheese good, it'll have all your friends saying..."

- "Bernie Madoff's underpants were sold at an auction. They were from..."
- "Carl's Jr. is selling a foot-long burger. You may know it better as..."
- "A company in North Carolina is selling a sixty-dollar IQ test that people can give their dogs. If you spend sixty bucks on a dog IQ test..."

If you visualize the topic of the joke as a circle (T), the angle of the joke is a line starting from that circle that guides the audience in a specific direction toward a punch line. See the diagram below.



Note that the angle that the writer chooses is only one of many possible angles (represented above by dashed lines) that he could have chosen. Each alternate angle could lead to a different punch line. For example, the angle chosen by the writer of the shoplifting joke means that the joke will be about something "the cops said." The joke won't be about what merchandise was stolen, what happened to the merchandise, or how the women prepared for the crime. But each one of those other angles could be used to write a different joke based on the shoplifting topic, as you'll see below.

In fact, the writer of that shoplifting joke may have submitted several versions of it to the host, each one with a different angle and punch line.

It's perfectly okay for a writer to submit multiple jokes on the same topic. Hosts can be hard to predict, so as long as you think each version of a joke is "pitchable," i.e., worth considering, why not let the host choose between them? Instead of retyping the topic for each version, some writers just type "[Same topic]" followed by the alternate angle and punch line.

So if several possible angles might work with a topic, how does the writer choose which one to use in writing a joke? There are two ways:

- Come up with a punch line for the joke and then write an angle that points from the topic to that punch line. That is, the punch line comes first, then the angle.

- Apply several different angles to the topic and select the angle that leads to the best punch line. That is, the angle comes first, then the punch line.

Either way, a writer can't decide what angle to use in his joke until he decides on a punch line. So let's talk about punch lines.

THE PUNCH LINE

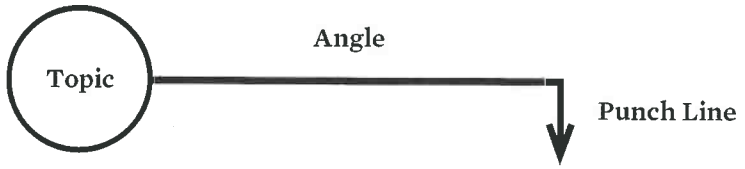
The punch line is the third and last part of the joke, the word or phrase that results in a laugh. According to the Surprise Theory of Laughter, the punch line introduces an incongruity into the joke which—surprise!—turns out to actually make sense. Put another way, the punch line is the surprising revelation of a harmless truth. In my caveman analogy, the punch line is the equivalent of the rustling grass suddenly flattening to reveal not a saber-toothed cat but two monkeys having sex.

So it stands to reason that if a punch line is a surprising revelation of a [illegible] must be (1) surprising and (2) true. Let's look at those

1. A punch line has to be surprising.

The same Aristotle who proposed the three-act story structure also said, "The secret to humor is surprise." The principle that humor depends on surprise underlies everything from the punch line of a joke to a sight gag in a movie comedy. I'll refer to the surprise principle again and again in this book.

The surprise in a Monologue joke occurs because the topic and angle prime the audience to think in a certain direction but suddenly, incongruously, the punch line veers off in a different direction. Comedy writer Gene Perret points out that a joke can be represented by a line with a sharp turn at the end. Here's my version of the joke diagram:



The more abrupt the turn, the more surprising it is to an audience member who is mentally traveling along the line of the angle. And the more surprising the turn is, the bigger the laugh it'll produce. In my prehistoric analogy, the caveman won't roar as loudly when the wind flattens the grass and reveals the monkeys if, moments earlier, he heard the sounds of hot monkey love emanating from behind the grass.

2. A punch line has to be true.

You've probably heard the saying, "It's funny because it's true." It means that a punch line will get a big laugh only if it makes a point that most of the audience agrees with. Jay Leno put it well when he said to me, "Tell people what they already know."

For example, if the punch line of a joke implies that a certain celebrity smokes a lot of marijuana, the audience won't laugh unless they already

agree that the celebrity does smoke a lot of marijuana. The caveman won't roar with primitive laughter when the wind flattens the grass if he doesn't believe those really are two monkeys going at it.

The requirement that a Monologue joke must tell people what they already know may seem paradoxical. After all, shouldn't comedy/talk show hosts be irreverent and open up the eyes of the audience to things they may not already see? Isn't it true that, as Joan Rivers was quoted as saying, "A comedian's job is to say the emperor's not wearing any clothes"?

Yes, a comedian should be outspoken, puncturing hypocrisy and taking shots at emperors, venerable institutions, and celebrities. But if the comedian tries to educate his audience they won't laugh. That little boy in Hans Christian Andersen's story who announced that the emperor had no clothes didn't get a laugh at first. Instead, he provoked a discussion among the confused spectators, who still wanted to believe that the emperor was fully clothed. The job of a comedy/talk show host isn't to get his audience to discuss his jokes. His job is to make his audience laugh, immediately and loudly, and to do that he can't say the emperor's not wearing any clothes. Instead, he has to tell the audience something they already know. The audience has to agree that his punch line is true.

Note that the punch line doesn't have to be factually true. The audience only has to accept that it's true for the punch line to get a laugh. For example, when George W. Bush was President most audience members of comedy/talk shows agreed that he was stupid. Even though an IQ test may have revealed that President Bush was, in fact, of above-average intelligence, for comedic purposes most people were willing to accept that he was an idiot. Similarly, when Bill Clinton was President most audience members agreed that he was a sex addict.

The fact that almost everybody, regardless of their political leanings, agreed that those Presidential traits were true made possible the

hundreds of Bush-is-dumb and Clinton-is-horny jokes that saturated late night. If the audience had disagreed about whether those characterizations were accurate they would have reacted along party lines. Only about half the audience would have laughed at a Bush-is-dumb or a Clinton-is-horny joke. The other half would have just sat there, silent and annoyed. And a late-night host can't afford to have half his audience not laughing at a joke.

How do you decide what an audience will accept as true? The same way you decide what topics an audience will let you joke about: keep your fingers on the pulse of public sentiment, watch late-night shows to see what their audiences are buying, and first try out any questionable joke on your trusted friends. Then make an educated guess.

Now I'll tell you about six techniques for creating a punch line that's both surprising and true.

THE SIX PUNCH LINE MAKERS

Most of the Monologue jokes on comedy/talk shows have punch lines that were created using one of six techniques. All of these techniques work by manipulating elements of the topic in a surprising way to say something true.

I call these six techniques Punch Line Makers. Here they are, listed roughly in the order of how often they're used, from most frequently to least frequently.

■ PUNCH LINE MAKER #1: Link two associations of the topic.

This technique consists of four steps:

1. Identify two handles of the topic.

As I mentioned, good topics for Monologue jokes grab your attention. The most attention-grabbing elements of the topic, the words or phrases that are most responsible for making the topic interesting, I call the handles. The handles are the details that stand out the most in the topic. They can be people, places, things, or actions. Many topics have two handles. Decide what they are.

Take the topic, "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat." The fact that the two people mentioned are women, the fact that they're from Oklahoma, and the fact that the merchandise is worth two thousand dollars don't particularly stand out.

The two elements that do stand out and make this news story interesting and worthy of being a joke topic are the fact that the women were caught shoplifting and the fact that they hid the merchandise in the rolls of their body fat. So the two handles of this topic are "caught shoplifting" and "rolls of body fat."

2. Brainstorm a list of associations for each handle.

An association is something that comes to mind when you (and ideally most other people) think about a particular subject. An association could be a person, place, thing, action, adjective, event, phrase, quotation, expression, or concept, among other things. Come up with a list of associations related to each of the two handles of the topic.

Continuing with our shoplifting joke example, here are lists of some associations that the joke writer might have generated for the two handles:

Caught shoplifting	Rolls of body fat
Crime preparations	Obese
Security cameras	Overeating
Police	Too many calories
Get arrested	Doesn't exercise
"You have the right to remain silent."	Sweaty
Get searched	Disgusting
"We can do this the easy way or the hard way."	Heavyweight
Stolen merchandise	Enormous breasts
Value of merchandise	Double chins
Collect the evidence	"Muffin top"
Press charges	Huge clothes
Handcuffs	Clothing too small
Fingerprinting	Size XXXXL
Mug shots	A plus-size celebrity

3. Link together one association from each list to reveal a truth.

Run the two lists through your head, pairing each association in one list with each association in the other list. Find a couple of associations that you can cleverly link together to make an observation that most people would accept as true. That observation will become your punch line.

In our example, the writer mentally paired the "caught shoplifting" associations with the "rolls of body fat" associations, spinning the lists together like two discs in a combination lock. One pair clicked: "We can do this the easy way or the hard way" and "disgusting." The writer linked the two together to craft the punch line, "We can do this the easy way or the disgusting way." That punch line would strike most people as true because it would be fairly disgusting to have to retrieve merchandise from between somebody's sweaty rolls of bare flab.

4. Write an angle that points from the topic to the punch line.

Write a phrase or sentence that guides the audience logically and efficiently from the topic to the punch line you've just created. That phrase or sentence will be the angle of your joke.

Because the punch line in our example—"We can do this the easy way or the disgusting way"—is something the police would say, the most logical, efficient angle for the joke was, "The cops said..." Putting the topic, angle, and punch line together we get this joke as aired on *Conan*:

> "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat. The cops said, 'We can do this the easy way or the disgusting way.'"

Since this punch line was created from two associations that most people would agree relate to the topic, the punch line will strike an audience as true. And since the punch line combines those associations in an unexpected way, it will also surprise the audience. This punch line is both surprising and true and that's why the joke got a laugh.

At this point you might be asking yourself, "Out of all the hundreds of ways to pair up the associations on both lists, how can I possibly find that one pair that will produce a punch line?" The answer is that there isn't just one pair that can produce a punch line. Other pairs of associations can be linked to create other, different punch lines.

For example, below are three other jokes that could be spun out of those same two lists of associations. (These other jokes are represented by dashed-line arrows in the diagram about angles earlier in this chapter.)

- "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat. Luckily, they were arrested before they could use the merchandise—thong bikinis." In this case I linked "stolen merchandise" with "clothing too small."

- "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat. Even worse, before they stole the merchandise it was worth ten thousand dollars." Here I connected "value of merchandise" and "sweaty."

- "Two Oklahoma women were caught shoplifting two thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stuffed in the rolls of their body fat. To bulk up for the crime they also shoplifted two thousand dollars' worth of burritos from 7-Eleven." This one connects "crime preparations" with "overeating."

As you can see from that exercise, the more associations you can generate for each handle of a topic, the easier it is to create multiple jokes from that topic. I'll discuss this concept in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

You might also be asking yourself whether it's necessary to

Even after years of creating jokes I would still occasionally write down lists of associations. When I was with *LSWDL* I kept written lists of dozens of associations for three particular topics we kept returning to over and over for comedy: President Clinton, Michael Jackson, and New York City. Whenever I learned of a new detail associated with one of the topics—the small room next to the Oval Office where President Clinton had sex with intern Monica Lewinsky, for example—I'd add it to the appropriate list. The lists were a real time-saver when I wrote jokes about those topics, say for a "Top Ten List." Instead of repeatedly combing my brain for the same associations I could just scan the lists.

actually write down the two lists of associations. The answer is no. When the process becomes more instinctive you'll be able to generate a list of associations in your head and try out each one mentally as you think of it. That's the way professional Monologue writers work. But writing down the associations can help you at first while you're still learning these techniques.

Before I move on, take a look at a few more late-night Monologue jokes that were created using Punch Line Maker #1:

- "China started conducting its nationwide census this week. That's right, parents will be required to list each child's age, grade, and occupation." [*LNWJF*] This punch line combines the "China" association "child labor" with the "census" association "occupation."

- "Paris Hilton is banned from the Wynn Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. I'm not sure what Paris is banned for but I think we can rule out card counting." [*TSWJL*] This punch line links the "Paris Hilton" association "dumb" to the "casino" association "card counting."

- "ABC is developing a new drama about pilots and flight attendants. The show is scheduled to air at 8:00 p.m., so it'll probably get going around 9:43." [*LNWJF*] This punch line combines the "new drama" association "time slot" with the "pilots and flight attendants" association "late departure."

- "Starbucks may start selling beer and wine at its coffee shops. Apparently, Starbucks is having trouble finding sober people willing to pay nine bucks for a cup of coffee." [*Conan*] This punch line links the "Starbucks" association "expensive coffee" to the "beer and wine" association "impaired judgment."

■ PUNCH LINE MAKER #2: Link the topic to pop culture.

More specifically, link an association of the topic to something that the association suggests in popular culture. This is a variation of Punch Line Maker #1. It entails four steps:

1. Identify a handle of the topic.

For example, take the topic "Charlie Sheen is on the show tonight to talk about his hit TV show *Anger Management*." One obvious handle of the topic, a distinctive detail, is "*Anger Management*."

2. Brainstorm a list of associations for the handle.

Continuing with the example, associations for "*Anger Management*" include words and phrases like "rage," "cursing," "short temper," "throwing things," "classes," and "Adam Sandler movie."

3. Try to identify something in pop culture that each association suggests.

Take each association on your list in turn and see if it calls to mind some person, place, or thing in pop culture. If it does, that pop culture reference could be the basis for your punch line. The writer of our sample joke made a connection between "rage" (or one of the other "angry behavior" associations) and Rutgers University basketball coach Mike Rice, who was in the news because of a video that showed him verbally and physically abusing his players. So the punch line became Mike Rice.

4. Write an angle that points from the topic to the punch line.

In our example the punch line, Mike Rice, is a person. Since the topic refers to a TV show, *Anger Management*, the most efficient angle to connect the two was

something like, "In fact, they're adding a new character this year..." Putting the topic, angle, and punch line together we get this joke that aired on *TSWJL*:

> "Charlie Sheen is on the show tonight to talk about his hit TV show *Anger Management*. In fact, they're adding a new character this year—Rutgers coach Mike Rice."

So instead of deriving the punch line from two associations of the topic, as you do using Punch Line Maker #1, this technique connects one association of the topic to something in pop culture that isn't even mentioned in the topic. The connection yields a surprising punch line that, because it strikes the audience as true, makes them laugh.

Here are more examples of jokes written using Punch Line Maker #2:

- "A new study showed that heavy drinkers live longer than non-drinkers. Finally, some good news for David Hasselhoff." [*TSWJL*] The handle of the topic is "heavy drinkers." An obvious association of the handle is "heavy drinker." This association suggested the actor David Hasselhoff, who was in the news for a video that showed him trying to eat a hamburger off the floor while roaring drunk.

- "Everybody's excited about college basketball's tournament. You know who is a big fan of the Syracuse Orangemen? John Boehner." [*LSWDL*] The handle of the topic is "college basketball." One association of the handle is the name of a college basketball team—the "Syracuse Orangemen." "Orangemen" suggested Speaker of the House John Boehner, who is well-known for his orange tan.

- "There's a Nerf automatic dart gun that fires sixty darts in twenty seconds. Our kids are so fat now that it takes sixty darts to take them down." [*TSWJL*] One handle is "sixty darts." An association of that is "tranquilizing a large beast," which suggested a punch line about a well-publicized problem in the U.S.—childhood obesity.

- "NBC is creating a new reality dating show that is being described as a cross between *Survivor* and *The Bachelor*. It's called *Who Wants to Date Charlie Sheen?*" [*LNWJF*] One handle is *Survivor*. An association of the handle is "dangerous situations." This association suggested a punch line about actor Charlie Sheen, who had a reputation for violence and had been arrested for assaulting his wife.

Note that the host himself is a part of pop culture so you could also consider using him in the punch line. It's okay--many hosts make jokes at their own expense because they know that self-deprecation can make them even more likeable. Here's an example that Jay Leno told about himself on *TSWJL*: "According to the tabloids, while Brad Pitt was in France, Angelina Jolie was in Los Angeles partying with a handsome hunk. Nonsense...We had one drink!"

■ PUNCH LINE MAKER #3: Ask a question about the topic.

With Punch Line Makers #1 and #2 you create a punch line first and then back into an angle. By contrast, with this technique you start with an angle and then move forward into a punch line. Writing a joke using this technique involves three steps:

1. Ask questions about the topic.

Comedian Judy Carter credits comic Steve Marmel with this suggestion (and I'm paraphrasing here): ask questions about the topic that begin with "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how." In other words, ask questions as if you were a reporter gathering more information about

the topic. Each one of those "Five Ws and an H" questions represents a possible angle on the topic.

To illustrate, take this topic: "Denny's has a new sandwich called the Fried Cheese Melt, which comes with deep-fried mozzarella sticks inside a grilled cheese." One question the writer might have asked about that topic is, "What are people saying about the new sandwich?"

2. To get a punch line, answer each question using associations of the topic.

Take each question and try to answer it in a surprising way by using associations of one or two handles of the topic. The funniest one of those answers is your punch line.

Continuing with our example, the writer might have tried to answer the question "What are people saying about the new sandwich?" by using some associations of the handle "Fried Cheese Melt." Possible associations include "high cholesterol," "clogged arteries," "heart attack," and "defibrillator," and a sub-association of "defibrillator," which is "Clear!" Since "Clear!" could answer the question the writer asked, he made that his punch line.

3. Write the angle so it flows naturally from the topic.

Guided by the "Five Ws and an H" question that inspired your punch line, write an angle that's consistent with the content and tone of the topic. An angle that sounds like a natural continuation of the topic will help misdirect the audience and maximize the surprise of the punch line.

Going back to our example, the writer needed an angle that implied that the punch line would reveal what people are saying about the new sandwich. The angle also had to convey enthusiasm, so that the morbid

picture painted by the punch line would be a surprising contrast. One angle that does those jobs efficiently is "It's so good, it'll have all your friends saying..." Adding that angle to the topic and punch line yielded the complete joke as aired on *LNWJF*:

> "Denny's has a new sandwich called the Fried Cheese Melt, which comes with deep-fried mozzarella sticks inside a grilled cheese. It's so good, it'll have all your friends saying, 'Clear!'"

Note that more than one "Five Ws and an H" question can lead to a solid punch line. In the case of our example, the topic also invites the question, "What other new item is Denny's selling?" You could answer that question by combining the "Denny's" association "Grand Slam Breakfast" with the "Fried Cheese Melt" association "bypass surgery." This could yield a different joke:

> "Denny's has a new sandwich called the Fried Cheese Melt, which comes with deep-fried mozzarella sticks inside a grilled cheese. It goes really well with their other new item, the Grand Slam Bypass."

Or you could ask the question, "What else does the sandwich come with?" Combine the "Denny's" association "place mat" with the "Fried Cheese Melt" association "write your will" to arrive at a third possible punch line and joke:

> "Denny's has a new sandwich called the Fried Cheese Melt, which comes with deep-fried mozzarella sticks inside a grilled cheese. It also comes with a special place mat and a crayon so you can write your will."

So if the topic is fertile because it has a lot of associations, asking questions can lead to multiple jokes based on the same topic.

Here are more examples of jokes that were written using Punch Line Maker #3:

- "Kia is recalling their logo on their hoods. Not because they injure anyone, it's just that the owners are embarrassed to have it on there." [*TSWJL*] This topic invited the question, "Why is Kia recalling their logo?" The answer, the basis of the punch line, arose from the association of "Kia" in the topic with "embarrassing."

- "A couple in Toronto had their Facebook friends vote on the name of their newborn daughter. So congratulations to the couple and their baby girl, 'Like.'" [*LNWJF*] The obvious question was, "What name did their friends choose?" The punch line came from the association of "Facebook" in the topic with "like."

- "New York City is considering a law to ban people from wearing costumes in Times Square after a man dressed as the Cookie Monster shoved a little boy. In his defense, Cookie Monster said, 'Boy not give up cookie.'" [*LNWJF*] The topic prompts the question, "Why would the man do that?" An association of "Cookie Monster" in the topic is "craves cookies," which is the basis of the punch line.

- "Quentin Tarantino has had to alter *Django Unchained* so it can be shown in China. It will be *Django Escapes the iPad Factory*." [*Conan*] One question you could ask is, "How did Tarantino alter the movie?" An association of "Django Unchained" is "escapes slavery" and an association of "China" is "poor factory conditions." The answer to the question, the punch line, links the two associations.

■ PUNCH LINE MAKER #4: Find a play on words in the topic.

Seventeenth-century poet and playwright John Dryden called the pun the "lowest and most groveling kind of wit." But Dryden didn't have to squeeze out fifty jokes a day five days a week. The fact is that a play on words like a pun can be a very effective device for combining associations in a surprising way to create a punch line.

This technique is similar to Punch Line Maker #1 and entails four steps:

1. Identify two handles of the topic.

For example, take the topic about that notorious Ponzi scheme operator: "Bernie Madoff's underpants were sold at an auction." The two most distinctive elements of the topic—the handles—are "Bernie Madoff" and "underpants."

2. Brainstorm a list of associations for each handle.

In our example, associations of the handle "Bernie Madoff" include "Ponzi scheme," "cheat," "fraud," "arrested," and "scam." Associations of the handle "underpants" include "briefs," "Fruit of the Loom," "elastic waistband," "Jockey," and "tighty-whities."

3. Link together one association from each list to create a play on words.

A play on words can be created if you have one of two basic situations:

- two different words that sound similar
- one word that has two different meanings

Either type of play on words will work for a punch line. Continuing with our example, the "Bernie Madoff" association "fraud" sounds like "fruit" in "Fruit of the Loom." Substituting one word for the other yielded the play on words—and the punch line—"Fraud of the Loom."

4. Write an angle that points from the topic to the punch line.

"Fraud of the Loom" is supposedly a brand of underpants so the most effective angle would lead the audience to expect that the punch line will answer the question, "What company made the underpants?" The angle "They were from..." would do that job efficiently, so adding that to the topic and punch line gave the writer on *LSWDL* the final version of the joke:

> "Bernie Madoff's underpants were sold at an auction. They were from 'Fraud of the Loom.'"

Here are more examples of jokes with punch lines created using Punch Line Maker #4:

- "An airline in Sweden plans to host the first-ever in-flight gay wedding in December. The entire flight crew is excited for the event, although the right wing isn't happy about it." [*LNWJF*] One association of the handle "airline" is "right wing." "Right wing" is also an association of the handle "gay," since right-wing politicians are traditionally opposed to gay marriage. This double meaning of "right wing" gives the punch line its surprise.

- "In high school Kim Jong-un starred in a production of the musical *Grease*. That's also where Kim met his first wife, Olivia Newton Jong." [*Conan*] The handle "Kim Jong-un" has the association ...ociated with the actress "Olivia Newton John." "Jong" sounds like "John," so the writer mashed the two names together for a play on words in the punch line.

- "The folks at Google are testing a car that drives itself, without a human. You thought it was bad when your computer crashed." [*TSWJL*] "Crash," with two different meanings, is an association of both the handle "Google" and the handle "car."

- "Scientists in Utah have discovered a new species of dinosaur believed to have the most horns of any dinosaur in history. Experts called it the horniest dinosaur ever—and then Larry King said, 'Well, I had a good run.'" [*LNWJF*]

This last joke demonstrates a variation on the play-on-words technique. In this case the writer started with the handles "dinosaur" and "horniest" and then came up with different meanings for both those words, namely "out-of-date" and "lustful." Turning to pop culture for a celebrity who's commonly considered to be out-of-date and lustful produced Larry King, the TV interviewer who has been in show business for over fifty years and has been married eight times. So the writer used Larry King and a double play on words to arrive at the punch line. This joke shows that it's possible to blend two Punch Line Makers—in this case #2 and #4—when you're writing a joke.

■ PUNCH LINE MAKER #5: Visualize the topic.

The previous technique involved a play on words. This technique involves what I call a play on images. It consists of three steps:

1. Form a mental picture of the topic.

Base your mental picture on a handle or handles of the topic. Take the topic, "Carl's Jr. is selling a foot-long burger," for example. A handle of

the topic, a detail that makes the topic interesting, is "foot-long burger." So imagine what a foot-long burger looks like.

2. Write a punch line about a different perspective on that mental picture.

A different perspective on the mental picture is a different way of looking at it. You can get that different perspective in one of two ways:

- Think of something different that resembles the mental picture.
- Exaggerate some association of the mental picture. That is, think of associations of the mental picture and take one to an extreme.

In our example, the truth is that a foot-long burger probably resembles a meatloaf. So the writer based the punch line on the idea that a foot-long burger is a meatloaf.

3. Write an angle that points from the topic to the punch line.

For the punch line in our example, the writer needed an angle that would lead the audience to expect an answer to the question, "What's that burger called?" Adding the angle "You may know it better as..." to the topic and punch line resulted in this joke as aired on *LSWDL*:

> "Carl's Jr. is selling a foot-long burger. You may know it better as a meatloaf."

Here are more jokes with punch lines that were constructed using Punch Line Maker #5:

- "The French Senate has outlawed the burka, giving hope to U.S. lawmakers that one day soon, we will outlaw the Snuggie." [*TSWJL*] If you visualize the handle "burka" in the topic you imagine a cloak that covers your whole body. This cloak looks like a different, but also controversial, garment—a Snuggie. The punch line points out that resemblance and the angle smoothly continues the topic's theme of a government outlawing things.

- "Tom Cruise made his first public comments about his divorce from Katie Holmes. He said, 'I didn't see it coming.' Apparently Katie kept her divorce papers on top of the refrigerator." [*Conan*] The writer visualized Tom not being able to see something. One association of Tom Cruise is "really short" so the writer exaggerated that and imagined Tom being so short that he couldn't even see the top of a refrigerator. That gave the writer the different perspective he used in the punch line.

- "*Time* magazine is now ranking the best tweets of the year and, according to *Time*, the best tweet for 2010 was written by John McCain. Experts say it's even more impressive because McCain thought he was opening his garage door." [*Conan*] The writer visualized McCain tapping away at a smartphone. One association of McCain is "really old" so the writer apparently imagined McCain as being so exaggeratedly old and feebleminded that he's mistaking his smartphone for something it resembles—his garage door opener. That different perspective became the punch line.

- "It's rumored that Shaq and his girlfriend are engaged. When he proposed, Shaq got down on one knee and said, 'Hey, you down there. Will you marry me?'" [*LNWJF*] Visualizing the engagement of basketball player Shaquille O'Neal produced a mental picture of him proposing on one knee. Shaq is really tall, over seven feet. Exaggerating that association led to an image of the kneeling but still giant Shaq towering over his

average-sized fiancée. The punch line grew out of that different perspective.

It's okay to take your mental pictures to extremes. For instance, when Pringles Potato Chips first came out with a new version containing a substance called olestra, Jay Leno told a joke on *TSWJL* that went something like, "A warning on the new fat-free Pringles Potato Chips says that they may cause anal leakage. Finally you have a use for that can." Apparently the writer imagined a naked guy with uncontrolled diarrhea standing there with a can of Pringles and then adjusted that mental picture to have the guy position the can under his rear end. And it turns out that the joke might have been even more nauseating. Some years later I told it to somebody who had actually been involved in launching Pringles with olestra. The person told me that the FDA was very close to requiring that the Pringles label warn against "fecal seepage." But Jay might have drawn the line at that wording.

■ PUNCH LINE MAKER #6: State the obvious about the topic.

Do that by providing the obvious answer to an obvious question suggested by the topic. This technique leads to punch lines that get laughs because they're surprisingly direct. The audience expects the punch line to make a sharp turn the way punch lines usually do but instead, unexpectedly, it charges straight ahead. The technique, which is related to Punch Line Maker #3, involves three steps:

1. Ask an obvious question suggested by the topic.

That is, ask the "Five Ws and an H" question that you think is most likely to pop into the heads of audience members when they hear the

To illustrate, take this topic: "A company in North Carolina is selling a sixty-dollar IQ test that people can give their dogs." The audience would probably ask themselves, "Who would buy that?"

2. Write a punch line based on the obvious answer to that question.

Think of how the audience would most likely answer that obvious question. That is, think of the answer that the audience would consider to be the most obvious. That answer, in some form, could be the basis of a punch line.

Continuing with our example, the audience would probably agree that a sixty-dollar IQ test for dogs is a waste of money. Therefore they would probably respond to the question "Who would buy that?" with the answer, "An idiot." That suggests that the punch line should be some clever way of saying "an idiot," like "someone who should take an IQ test."

3. Write an angle that points from the topic to the punch line.

Write an angle that implies that the punch line will answer the obvious question suggested by the topic. In the case of our example that obvious question is, "Who would buy that?" so the angle should mean, "Here's who would buy that." Adding an angle like that to the topic and punch line led to this joke as aired on *LNWJF*:

> "A company in North Carolina is selling a sixty-dollar IQ test that people can give their dogs. If you spend sixty bucks on a dog IQ test, maybe you should take that IQ test."

Here are more examples of Punch Line Maker #6 in action:

- "The tax cut deal means tax cuts for the rich and benefits for the unemployed. If you work for a living, you're screwed." [*TSWJL*]

The topic is "The tax cut deal means tax cuts for the rich and benefits for the unemployed." An obvious question suggested by that topic is, "What if you aren't rich or unemployed?" The obvious answer in the minds of the audience, most of whom work for a living and think their taxes are too high, would be, "You're screwed." So that becomes the punch line.

- "In October, a monument will be unveiled in South Carolina honoring the band Hootie and the Blowfish. No word yet as to why." [*LNWJF*] An obvious question about that monument erected in South Carolina is, "Why?" Most likely few people in the audience are big fans of Hootie and the Blowfish so the audience's answer to that question would be, "Who the heck knows?" The punch line reflects that answer.

- "A rattlesnake handler in Texas is recovering in the hospital after being bitten for the twelfth time. If you're a rattlesnake handler and you've been bitten twelve times, are you really a handler? Aren't you just a guy who doesn't know how to pick up snakes?" [*TSWJL*] The topic suggests the obvious question, "How could a rattlesnake handler get bitten twelve times?" The audience would probably answer, "He couldn't." And that's basically what the punch line says: that guy is no rattlesnake handler.

- "A man is trying to organize zeppelins, blimps, and other dirigibles for a race around the world. This would be a huge story if it was 1907." [*TSWJL*] This topic raises the obvious question, "Who would be interested in that weird race?" The answer in the audience's minds would probably be, "People who are really excited by zeppelins, blimps, and dirigibles," namely people living in the early 1900s. The angle and punch line reflect that answer.

PUTTING THE PUNCH LINE MAKERS TO WORK

You now have six techniques for creating punch lines. If you're trying to write a joke on a particular topic, which technique should you use? Start with Punch Line Maker #1 and if that doesn't seem to be getting you anywhere, go down the list and try the other techniques. See which one results in the funniest punch line. If none of the Punch Line Makers yields a winner within a reasonable amount of time, don't keep banging your head against the topic. Maybe it isn't as fertile as it seemed to be. Move on to another promising topic.

What makes a topic fertile for joke writing? As I suggested earlier in this chapter, the more associations a topic has the more fertile it will tend to be. That's because, as you've probably noticed, the associations of a topic play a huge role in creating punch lines based on that topic. A topic with two handles, each of which has a lot of associations, offers many possible combinations that could spark a punch line. A topic like that might give you the feeling joke writers often have that "there has to be a joke in there somewhere."

So as you're poring over the day's news, direct your brainstorming efforts first at topics that not only have all six characteristics of being a good topic but also have a couple of handles with a lot of associations. After you've gained some experience, fertile topics like that will start to leap out at you from the vast sea of news items.

The joke-writing process may seem mechanical at first but as you practice the techniques in this chapter over and over they'll become more instinctive. You'll train your brain to automatically generate and weigh various possibilities until a punch line clicks into place. In other words, you'll begin to think like a professional Monologue writer.

THE ROUGH DRAFT

Okay, you've picked a topic and you're building it out with an angle and a punch line. Jot down the parts of the joke as you put it together so you don't forget them. Don't worry about how sloppy the wording is because you can tidy that up later. I tend to scribble down the basics of a new joke using pencil and paper, subconsciously giving the creative, right side of my brain permission to run free. When all the raggedy pieces are lined up in front of you and doing basically what you want them to do, you have the rough draft of a Monologue joke.

SUMMARY

A prospective writer for a comedy/talk show has to know how to write topical Monologue jokes because:

- On some comedy/talk shows every writer is asked to contribute to every comedy piece, including the Monologue.
- Monologue-type jokes are the main ingredients of many other pieces on a comedy/talk show.
- Most of the techniques used to write Monologue jokes also apply to writing jokes outside of comedy/talk shows.

Writing Monologue jokes is easier when you know the formula. It starts with the three parts of a joke: the topic, the angle, and the punch line.

The topic—It's a concise statement of the news item that the joke is based on. A good topic has six characteristics:

1. A good topic is factually true.
2. A good topic is not intentionally funny.
3. A good topic is only one sentence long.

4. A good topic is a news item that will capture most people's interest. Here are four signs that the news item will do that:
   - The media are covering it extensively.
   - Even people who aren't media professionals are talking about it.
   - You yourself have an emotional reaction to it.
   - At least one media outlet carries it as Odd News.
5. A good topic is something that your audience will let you joke about. You may be able to write acceptable jokes about an otherwise objectionable topic if you:
   - Avoid calling to mind the most disturbing aspects of the topic.
   - Remember that comedy equals tragedy plus time.
   - Remember that comedy also equals tragedy minus emotional connection.
   - Don't make fun of people for things they can't help.
6. A good topic is something that your host is willing to joke about.

The angle—It's the middle part of the joke and sets the particular direction the joke will take in getting from the topic to the punch line. It's at most one sentence long.

Any given topic can spawn more than one joke, each with a different angle. Sometimes you create the punch line first and then construct an angle to get to that punch line. Other times you try different angles first and see which inspires the funniest punch line.

The punch line—It's the word or phrase at the end of the joke that results in a laugh. The punch line must be surprising. It must also be true in the sense that the audience must agree with what the punch line is saying.

The six Punch Line Makers allow you to create punch lines that are both surprising and true. They are:

- Punch Line Maker #1: Link two associations of the topic.
- Punch Line Maker #2: Link the topic to pop culture.
- Punch Line Maker #3: Ask a question about the topic.
- Punch Line Maker #4: Find a play on words in the topic.
- Punch Line Maker #5: Visualize the topic.
- Punch Line Maker #6: State the obvious about the topic.

To create a punch line based on any given topic, start with Punch Line Maker #1 and go down the list. Your task will be easier if your topic is fertile, that is, has a lot of associations. Once you've worked out the three parts of your joke, jot them down in a rough draft.

Now it's time to fire up the left side of your brain, the more analytical side. If you used pencil and paper for your rough draft you may want to switch to a computer for this step, to signal to your brain that it needs to start thinking a different way. You still have work to do because the rough draft of a joke is like a rough diamond. It's valuable as it is, but to maximize its value you have to cut it a certain way, minimize its flaws, and polish it to a sparkling brilliance. Only then will it have the powerful impact on people that you want it to have. You need to edit your joke. I'll show you how in the next chapter.

6

HOW TO EDIT JOKES

LET'S TALK ABOUT basketball for a second. If you're playing in a professional basketball game it's not enough just to have possession of the ball. You have to put that ball in the basket. You have to score. And to do that you need top-notch ball handling skills.

Scoring with a joke is a little like sinking a basket. It's not enough just to have a rough draft of the joke, although that's an essential first step. You then need to move that joke past distractions, confusion, boredom, and other obstacles in the audience's brains to get a laugh. To do that with a joke you don't need ball handling expertise; you need word handling expertise. You need the ability to shift words around in a joke, substitute words, cut words, and all in precisely the right way. In other words, you need pro-level joke editing skills.

In this chapter you'll learn time-tested editing techniques for making jokes as funny as they can possibly be. I'll describe these techniques using topical Monologue jokes as examples but they also apply to editing any jokes you write for a comedy/talk show, like the jokes in a Desk