

A close-up portrait of Steve Martin. He is an older man with white hair, wearing round glasses, a light blue button-down shirt, and a dark purple blazer. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile and has both hands raised to his temples, adjusting his glasses. The background is a dimly lit room with a dark blue wall, a wooden sideboard with books and framed records, and a lamp with a warm orange glow.

MasterClass

# Steve Martin

—  
Teaches Comedy







## ABOUT **STEVE MARTIN**

Steve Martin was born in 1945 and raised in Inglewood, California. An imaginative youth, Steve nurtured a love for performing at an early age and became a talented musician and magician in college before turning his focus to comedy. He began writing for *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, a TV variety show, while in college, and in 1969 he won an Emmy Award for his work on the show. Steve cultivated a small but dedicated fanbase in the 1970s for his stand-up routines, but it wasn't until his 1976 appearance hosting *Saturday Night Live* that he became a renown comedian. Following his breakthrough, Steve transitioned from stand-up to acting and cemented a reputation as a blockbuster movie star with films like *The Jerk* (1979) and *All of Me* (1984). To date, he has acted in over 45 films and written 11.



1.

## INTRODUCTION

### CLASS GUIDE

Steve's Class Guide supplements each lesson with Chapter Reviews, Take It Further opportunities, and Assignments. This printable PDF is filled with places for you to take notes as you go.

### STEVE'S STAND-UP SHOWS AND FILMS

To fully enjoy some of the lessons, we recommend watching these films before beginning: *Roxanne*, *Bowfinger*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, and *Father of the Bride*. Also listen to the album *A Wild and Crazy Guy*.

## HOW TO USE STEVE'S MASTERCLASS

Welcome to Steve's class! The exercises in this Class Guide are designed to teach you the craft of comedy from the art of writing a joke to performing a stand-up routine. Use Steve's Class Guide to follow along with the video lessons, and share your assignments with friends and family to put his teachings and experiences into practice.

1.

## NOTES

## GETTING STARTED IN COMEDY

*“Don’t be intimidated starting with nothing. In fact, if you start with noth-ing, the workaround can lead you to originality.”*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- What About Comedy Speaks to You?
- Go Where the Action Is
- Be So Good They Can’t Ignore You
- Talk About Comedy
- Think About Comedy... All. The. Time.

### CHAPTER REVIEW

If Steve started with nothing, so can you! Developing the confidence to free your mind will take time, but the process will teach you about yourself and comedy. There are many qualities that make people cut out for show business. One is that they see something on stage or screen and immediately think, “I could do that,” or, “I could have written that.” Steve says that often-times (but not always) comedians are introverted and will learn to expose their innermost thoughts and feelings for the audience’s enjoyment, one small step at a time.

Make your own luck by moving to where the comedy is—Los Angeles, Chicago, Toronto, or New York City. You want to be within pointing distance when your time comes, and you can never predict when that moment will occur. Find a person or group to share your material with and get the creative juices flowing. Collaboration leads to ideas that you might not have come up with on your own, as well as an overall improvement of your jokes and sketches as others suggest what to cut from or add to your act. Have a days-long extended talk with a friend about comedy. Really commit yourself to discussing the craft, and identify gaps that exist in the field. This is not only a great way to become familiar with various comedians and their respective styles, but also a means to learn about yourself.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- If you’re an introvert, don’t sweat it—so are lots of comedians! Read this article about a study conducted at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque in which 31 professional comedians were given personality tests. In this think piece, an Albright College professor also speculates as to why introverts excel at improvised comedy. If you’re intrigued by this topic, watch *Entertainment* (2015), an artistic film that follows a lonely, introverted stand-up comedian on a dismal tour across the Mojave Desert.



2.

## GETTING STARTED IN COMEDY

### TAKE IT FURTHER (CONTINUED)

- Steve recommends moving to where the comedy is, specifically Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, or Toronto. If that's not an option for you, find the comedy where you are! Seek out stand-up comedy clubs and open mic/amateur nights in your town or city. Work with what you've got and sign up to perform!
- Steve said he prepared for months for his role as host at the Academy Awards. Watch his opening monologue at the 2003 Oscars, and check out the 2010 Academy Awards he cohosted with actor Alec Baldwin.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Meet once a week with someone who is also an aspiring comedian, or round up a whole group. Set a topic for each week's meeting (e.g., school, work, family, sex, race, politics, celebrities, holidays), and run jokes and bits by each other. Write skits that can be performed together. Take notes about what worked and what didn't. Remember, always ask "What if?" and keep going!

2.

## NOTES

### 3.

## GATHERING MATERIAL

*"Everything you see, hear, experience is usable."*  
—Steve Martin

#### SUBCHAPTERS

- Educate Yourself
- Material Is Everywhere
- Mine Your Friends for Material
- Find a Vacuum You Can Fill
- Use What Everyone's Thinking

#### CHAPTER REVIEW

Always listen and observe the world, as everything around you can be used in your comedy routine, skit, or screenplay. Allow funny things that people say, and the way they behave and carry themselves, to inform your stand-up. Put your own spin on the material you gather from friends, and be sure to write your ideas down before you lose them. Ask yourself, "What does society need?" and fill that gap with your voice.

#### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Part of becoming an active observer in life is making sure you're always on the lookout, so get a notebook that fits in your back pocket and dedicate it to your comedic observances. Carry it around at all times and write down things you see or hear that strike you as funny. Consult your notebook at the end of each week and write five jokes with the materials gathered from the last seven days.
- Steve's friend and fellow comedian Charles Grodin never stops an argument when he sees one. Instead, he observes. The next time you're out in public and an altercation or disagreement between two people occurs, watch them (discreetly). Take notes and mine their quarrel for material. Learn the "shape of an argument" and apply it to your own comedic endeavors, whether they take the form of a skit or a screenplay.
- Steve appreciates comedian Carl Reiner's ability to speak the truth and say what's on everyone's mind. Adopt Reiner's approach to comedy for a week (preferably in an environment where your frankness won't get you in trouble!) and see how your jokes land. Take note of things that work and things that don't.



3.

## GATHERING MATERIAL

### ASSIGNMENT

- Go to a busy public place and spend two or three hours just sitting and watching people. As you observe, write down as much as you can about the people you see, the conversations they have, and the things they do. When you get home, read through your notes. Circle moments and interactions that strike you as funny, and underline bits that feel like basic human truths or experiences that anyone can relate to. As you start to shape your voice and create an act in the next few chapters, you'll mine this material to craft a comedic performance.

3.

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## 4.

# FINDING YOUR COMEDIC VOICE

*"You're not going by the book, and even if you think you are, you're not. You're straying, and those little strays make you unique and different from everybody else."*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Liberate Your Individuality
- Tap into Your Cultural Perspective
- Characterize Yourself
- Establish a Manifesto
- Define Your Taste

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Your comedic voice should be unique. Try not to be derivative, and attempt to find something you can call yourself. Characterize yourself and always keep your attributes in mind when you're developing new bits. You should strive to form material around qualities and characteristics that adhere to your image and comedic voice. Try building a comedy manifesto that you can use as the springboard for your voice and your act. Establish your taste by determining what you will say and how you will say it.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Steve refers to futurism, an early 20th century Italian avant-garde art movement that embraced modernism and technology. Read the "Futurist Manifesto" by Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, then study the artwork of major figures in the movement such as Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carrà, and Gino Severini. What tenets of the "Futurist Manifesto" do their paintings and sculptures convey?
- Write your own manifesto. Steve's manifesto was centered on the idea of being funny without telling jokes; he wanted to make people laugh without their realizing why. He cites other examples of what to build a manifesto around, such as attacking the political establishment or the horridness of dating. Figure out your focus and label, then compose a manifesto. It can be as short or as long as you want. Refer to it every time you're working out a new joke or bit, and don't be afraid to adjust it as your comedy evolves.

4.

## FINDING YOUR COMEDIC VOICE

### ASSIGNMENT

- Steve proposes using your unique cultural perspective as fodder for your act. What culture defines you? What kind of household did you grow up in? What values were instilled in you? What lifestyle and customs do you embrace now? Do some thinking about your background and write a bit with that perspective at its heart. It could be as simple as a bit about the city you live in. Remember, as Steve says, it doesn't matter how obscure your viewpoint is; if you can do one thing perfectly, a lot of people will care, even if they don't share your background. Record your bit and begin to study your own approach to performance. What do you notice about your personality, delivery, and presence?



4.

## NOTES

## 5. DEVELOPING A COMEDIC PERSONA

*“What you’re doing on stage is creating an artistic image of yourself determined by the things you put in, the things you leave out, its level of intellect—high or low—the use of language.”*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Choose Who to Be
- Imagine Yourself at Your Best
- Explore Your Worst Quality
- Dress the Part
- Steve’s Comedic Persona

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Everything determines your artistic image, from the language you use to the clothes you wear to the level of intellect to which you appeal. Even the things you exclude from your act contribute to your comedic persona. Your persona is the mechanism by which you disseminate your voice. Consider how the two elements inform one another and see what you come up with. As a comedian, you have the freedom to choose who you want to be and define a personality that you can inhabit on stage.

Pay attention to yourself, the way you naturally behave and how you interact with others as you develop your comedic persona. Consider starting with your worst quality, as it can be riper for comedy than your admirable traits. Think about opportunities for parody when constructing your persona. Picture yourself at your best. What does that mean for you? Aspire to that image of yourself.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Steve parodied show business when he started as a stand-up comedian. What can you parody? In your comedy notebook, start a running list of milieus to parody—airplane travel, teenagers, in-laws—and add ideas to your list as you observe these groups.
- For the next week, dedicate 10 minutes, either first thing in the morning or just before bed each day, to imagining yourself at your absolute best as a comedian, performer, or writer. What will you look like? What will you talk about? How will the audience feel about you? Jot down your thoughts.
- Experiment with outfits. What do you want to say with your “look”? How do the choices you’re making with your look support your persona?

5.

## DEVELOPING A COMEDIC PERSONA

### ASSIGNMENT

- Steve's appearance was not wild and crazy, nor was he a "ramblin' guy," yet he found it funny to call himself such on stage. Now it's your turn to experiment with opposites. What are you absolutely not? Shy and reserved? Extroverted and itching to talk to everyone? Play on what you're not and work that into your act. Come up with a few jokes that work with your opposite qualities and share them with friends and family.

5.

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## JOKES AND BITS

*"I started to realize that I should come across as though I think what I'm doing is hilarious and never acknowledge that it wasn't funny or didn't get a laugh. Just keep going—like 'I'm great, you're just behind it.'"*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Make Yourself the Subject
- Establish Expectations, Then Twist Them
- Add Some Irony
- Think Beyond Punchlines
- Develop a Bit from One Idea
- Use Old Jokes in New Contexts
- Go On and On and On...and On

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Every comedian has his or her own approach to comedy. Steve decided early in his career to work beyond the classic setup/punchline joke structure and try to make the audience laugh without indicating the funny moments in his act. Misusing language, defying the audience's logical expectations, beating a joke to death, a mere look or facial expression—these are all viable approaches to comedy. There are countless ways to make your audience laugh, so figure out what works best with your persona and style.

Don't discard jokes that aren't working for you now. Instead, save them for the other projects. A stand-up joke that's falling flat might be better suited for a screenplay that you have yet to write, so collect all your current failures and transform them into future successes.

## JOKES AND BITS

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### ASSIGNMENTS

- Steve recommends that comedians study logical fallacies, as their forms are commonly used to build jokes. To take your joke work further, research the different types of logical fallacies (and look up a few examples of each type.) Choose five types of fallacies and write jokes that follow their structures.
- Practice mining an idea for jokes. Going through your notebook of possible material, pick one idea and squeeze 10 different jokes out of it. Keep pushing until you have 10. List them in your notebook and circle your favorites.

6.

## NOTES

## DELIVERY

*"It's your tempo. It's your space between the words. It's your really negative moments when you're not talking. That is timing."*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Timing Your...Timing
- Speak with Your Body
- Stay Ahead of the Audience
- Make It Look Spontaneous

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Your timing is significant and constitutes not only the speed and volume at which you deliver lines, but also the negative moments in which you're not speaking. A fundamental component of your timing is waiting for a laugh to be over and knowing when to proceed. Don't start your next joke while laughter from the previous one is still going, but be sure to begin before the laughter dies out. Steve suggests rolling over jokes and not waiting for the laugh. You never want to be behind the audience, and a certain amount of unevenness in your speech will get their attention.

Give thought to your physical comedy, which can be big and over-the-top or as subtle as lining up your body with what you're saying. This also plays a part in creating a sense of movement for the audience and keeping their attention during moments of silence. Remember, even if you're not speaking, your body is. When you're on stage, try to make it look like something has just occurred to you in the middle of a joke and that you're coming up with things naturally. Your audience will respond to a feeling of spontaneity. Aim to be perceived as effortless and instinctive, not forced and artificial.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Pick a favorite joke of yours and rehearse it until you know it well. In front of a mirror, practice making it seem spontaneous—like the whole thing just came to you in an instant. Work that artificial spontaneity into your next performance, or try it out casually in conversation.



7.

## DELIVERY

### ASSIGNMENT

- The line “I don’t want to belong to any club that would have me as a member” is attributed to Groucho Marx, but in this chapter, Steve imagines how the impact of the line would change if a different comedian delivered it. With a partner, group, exchange three lines or jokes. Adapt their bits to your own delivery and vice versa. Observe how your different deliveries alter the impact of the joke and how the joke changes when it is said with a different tone, speed, or style.

7.

## NOTES

## 8.

# CRAFTING YOUR ACT

*“When you’re performing, everything matters. Everything. It’s not just, ‘Here’s a joke and here’s another joke’—in between those jokes it’s mattering.”*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Use Everything You’ve Got
- Precision Creates Movement
- Use Every Moment
- Create Unity through Callbacks
- Give Your Act Meaning
- Don’t Overstate Your Message
- Test New Material Incrementally
- Go with Your Best

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Your act is a composite. Every element matters when you’re performing, from the words you speak to the motions that accompany them. Even the break you take to sip water or look at your setlist should be filled with intention, otherwise your act will lose momentum. The more precise you can be, the more movement you’ll create for the audience. Precision comes with performance experience; when you say a line for the hundredth time, the consonants and the vowels will subtly fall into place and you’ll be more aware of their impact on the audience.

Don’t think of your act in terms of progressing from bit to bit, but rather as a unified whole. Steve uses “callbacks” in which he lays something into the act early on and refers back to it throughout. This gives his show shape, his callbacks functioning as an invisible weave running through his act.

Your show needs to be about something, even if that something is difficult to pin down. Steve cites fellow comedian Amy Schumer to illustrate this concept, as her stand-up comedy is united by an overarching theme of female liberation and empowerment. Perhaps your show will be about criticizing popular culture or centered on political satire. Your theme will help connect pieces of your act, but it need not dictate every bit. In fact, your entire act might have only two jokes that criticize popular culture or work as political satire, but with proper placement and delivery, this type of humor can become what you are known for. Introduce new material bit by bit, and if it works expand on it. Always go with your best material and don’t be afraid to cut. Less is more, so remove bits that aren’t hitting their marks.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Steve quotes E.E. Cummings, who when asked why he became a poet responded, “Like the burlesk [sic] comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement.” Read these excerpts from “i: six nonlectures,” the piece from which the quote is derived.
- Watch Steve and Earl Scruggs perform “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” on The David Letterman Show.

## CRAFTING YOUR ACT

### TAKE IT FURTHER (CONTINUED)

- Craft interstitial bits that lead you from joke to joke. Experiment with physicality and come up with a move to implement between laugh points. How do you intentionally get from one joke to another without leaving dead air?

### ASSIGNMENT

- It's time to start assembling an act from the jokes and bits you've been collecting throughout the class so far. Over the course of the next few chapters, you'll workshop and tighten this act bit by bit. Go through the jokes and comedic ideas you've been collecting in your comedy notebook and think about how they might fit together. Which of them would you include in a five-minute act? String them together and start to practice them out loud. Record a video of yourself and aim for a loose 10 minutes. Later, you'll edit it down and tighten it. For now, the purpose is to get your favorite ideas on their feet and start to hear them strung together. Notice: are there any themes that emerge that you can play up to give your act meaning? Is there any single idea or other aspects of your personality that you can mine for more jokes? Are there any parts of your act that sound confusing when watching yourself perform the jokes aloud?



8.

## NOTES

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## 9.

# STUDENT SESSION: WORKSHOPPING NALINI'S ACT

*"Be something that they'd pay to see. Make them say, 'You gotta see this.'"*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Meet the Students
- Workshopping Nalini's Act
- Discussing Onstage Identity

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Stand-up comics come from a variety of backgrounds. Steve's group is composed of writers, improv actors, and even a singing biology tutor. Education is valuable in comedy, a lesson you learned in the assignment for Chapter 3, "Gather Material." The more you know, the more material you have. Your knowledge and unique experience set you apart from other comedians. Steve has been working on Nalini's first stab at a stand-up act based on her science background to increase clarity and comedic effect.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Educate yourself. Pick a field you've always wanted to learn about and spend an hour researching it. The journal *Science* is always a good resource to poke around in. If you prefer a broader range of topics, OMICS is a collection of scholarly journals from a variety of disciplines that's a little tricky to navigate but can lead you to cutting-edge research. Tell a friend or colleague what you learned and think about how you could incorporate your research into your act.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Spend some time revising and trimming your 10-minute act. Be ruthless: your goal should be to get it down to five minutes. You might have to cut some jokes or bits you like, but this exercise should help you choose your best material and think about being more efficient with what you say on stage. Cut out the unnecessary banter (chuffa). Record yourself delivering the five-minute version of your act. Watch and compare it to the video of your 10-minute act from Chapter 8. Which is stronger? Which feels funnier? Which is a clearer expression of what you want to say?

9.

## NOTES

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10.

## STUDENT SESSION: WORKSHOPPING TIM'S ACT

*"It has to feel like it's coming from a person, not just a joke teller... [W]hat you have to learn is to make those jokes sound like they're coming from you, and they're not scripted, that you're kind of being spontaneous."*  
—Steve Martin

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Steve perceives Tim as a kind person and for that reason suggests he be rude or get angry in his act. Working with opposites is a useful approach to comedy; you did this yourself in the assignment for Chapter 5, "Developing a Comedic Persona." Tim fabricates a character for himself that becomes part of his style on stage. This contributes to his overall personality, which, while carefully created, should feel natural and spontaneous. Work on delivering your lines and jokes in a way that sounds unrehearsed.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Take your act to the stage! Sign up for three different open mic nights over the course of the next two weeks and put your work thus far to the test. Note how your act impacts the audience in different circumstances and how external influences affect your three different performances. Experiment with your material by making subtle (or not so subtle) alterations to your timing and delivery. If you've got a willing friend, bring them along and ask them to assess your performances as well. This experience will offer you an opportunity to refine your act and stage presence going forward.

10.

## NOTES

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11.

## OPENING AND CLOSING YOUR ACT

*"If you're looking for an ending, look in the beginning or the middle. Something established there is your key to pulling it all together."*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Use Your Opening to Set the Tone
- Student Session:  
Workshopping Will's Opening
- End with Purpose
- Student Session:  
Button Up Your Act

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Your opening is valuable real estate. It's one of the most important components of your show, so don't squander it. The beginning is your chance to show the audience who you are, and the ending presents an opportunity to tie your act together and give it meaning. If you're not sure how to end, look in the beginning or middle for material you can reintroduce in order to provide cohesion. Thinking of your routine as a story will also help you conclude in a way that is satisfying for your audience. Keep in mind that the ending is what they remember, so place your biggest and most successful bits at the end.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Find a moment in your daily life to concentrate on an "opening." Maybe you're giving a demonstration at work, planning a speech for a wedding, welcoming a customer to your store, or simply entering a room. Whatever that presentational moment is in your life, think of it as a mini-performance. No need to go all out, but choose your words and physicality carefully and with purpose. Consider your persona, voice, and material, and remember that the first thing you say sets the tone for the rest of your "act." What do you want people to know about you when you first speak? What do you want them to feel? How can you cut out the "wasted motion" for your desired effect?

### ASSIGNMENT

- Come up with three different ways to open your act. Record yourself doing one of them, and upload the videos to the web to share. Observe how other students respond to your opening and whether or not they think it sets a strong tone for your act.

11.

## **OPENING AND CLOSING YOUR ACT**

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### ASSIGNMENT (CONTINUED)

- Steve recommends that you try figuring out how you want to close your act and work backward from there. Write down how you want an audience to feel when your act is over, then write down five ideas for closing bits that would leave them with that sensation. Think about how what sort of material you need to fill in your act in order to guide the audience from your openings to your closings.

11.

## NOTES

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## PROFANITY AND MORALITY

*“Will I be aggressive about people, or will I be more introspective about myself?”*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Foul Material
- Identify Your Morality
- Consider Kind Comedy
- Student Session:  
Workshopping Will's Act (cont'd)

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Choosing whether to use profanity or to be politically incorrect are deeply personal, intellectual decisions that you'll have to make for yourself. If foul material works for you, go for it, but if it doesn't suit your persona, don't feel compelled to include it in your act. Consider the impact your harsher material might have on others, and make sure these bits are conscious choices that you've given proper reflection before delivering them on stage. Insulting people is easy; kind comedy can be a more challenging and sophisticated route. Reflecting jokes back on yourself and being introspective and self-deprecating can be just as funny as making others the subjects of your jokes.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- One of Steve's favorite Richard Pryor lines is, “Hey, slow down! This is a neighborhood, this ain't no residential district!” Search online for Pryor's performance as “The Wino and The Junkie.” Think about how Pryor's foul language is working in this bit and why he gets away with it.
- The next time you're at a social function, notice when someone gets politically incorrect or oversteps a boundary for comedy's sake. How did their joke make you feel? Was it funny to you and to others present? Did it rub you the wrong way? Observe these kinds of situations and make a note of them whenever they happen. This will help you determine your own comedic style and where morality lies within it.
- Take a look at your own material. Are there any jokes that rely on foul language to be funny? Challenge yourself to execute the same joke without the profanity to see how it lands.

12.

## **PROFANITY AND MORALITY**

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### ASSIGNMENT

- Start a conversation with a friend or family member. Do you find any one stand-up comic to be particularly successful at that sort of comedy? Whose jokes can't you stand because they're too offensive? Take opinions into consideration and be generous with others' perspectives as you determine how far you're willing to let your act push the envelope.

12.

## NOTES

## GROWING AS A PERFORMER

*"You've got to give yourself room to be bad, because you learn more from being bad than you do from being great."*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Develop a Catalog of Material
- Get on Stage to Rehearse
- Give Yourself Room to Be Bad
- Embrace Your Mistakes
- Take the Next Step
- Building Confidence

### CHAPTER REVIEW

You should repeatedly go over lines and jokes in your head, but there's no substitute for real practice. Rehearsal only comes full circle once you're on stage performing in front of an audience. To develop confidence, perform and write consistently. Gain experience by signing on for a variety of shows. The stranger the circumstances in which you perform, the more confidence you'll build. This is a gradual process, and until you feel comfortable, just fake it; never let the audience know you're bombing and always think that you're funny. Remember that mistakes and bad shows present incredible learning opportunities.

As you perform more, you'll learn to sense when a joke isn't going to work halfway through its delivery. In these moments, your confidence will allow you to edit the line in real time, cutting and altering depending on the mood of your audience. You'll also begin to build a catalog of material that you can draw from when you need to revitalize your act.

Recognize when it's time to take the next step in your career. For Steve, this happened when—after consistently being the opening act, to no great avail—he resolved only to headline from that point forward. When he took that step, his audiences became smaller, but he finally began to get the reviews he needed.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Set yourself up for failure. Find an open mic night at a club, sign up, and show up 30 minutes before it starts. In those 30 minutes, write three new jokes you've never tried before. They might be really bad, and that's okay! Try them out on stage and see what you notice about things not going well. Write down what you learned.
- Think about building a following. Even if you don't have aspirations of being a professional comedian, look up your favorite comedians online and check out what sort of marketing efforts they make to grow a fan base: social media, mailing lists, public shows. How would you build a following?

13.

## GROWING AS A PERFORMER

### TAKE IT FURTHER (CONTINUED)

- Try implementing the “fake it ‘til you make it” approach to confidence in your life. If you’re typically shy in social situations, you can start to build confidence by pretending you’re confident and notice how your relationship to the social dynamic starts to change.

### ASSIGNMENTS

- After you’ve performed your first, second, and third-rate jokes, you’ll be out of material. Start building your catalog to prevent this shortage. Draw from the comedy notebook you began in Chapter 3, “Gathering Material,” and structure your entries into three tiers: best stuff, backups, and standbys. Best stuff will be your favorite jokes and bits that you feel like you can rely on. The backup tier should contain material you’d leave out of your first set on late-night TV. Everything that you want to work on before putting it on stage goes with your standbys.
- Note what bits and jokes you use the most and identify new angles to approach your standbys.



13.

## NOTES

14.

## NERVES, HECKLERS, AND BOMBING

*"The best thing to do is not rely on your material and rely on your personality, because your personality is always working.*

*Your personality doesn't require laughs."*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Nerves Are Natural
- Don't Look at the Audience
- Avoid Dinner Shows
- Student Session:  
Dealing with Hecklers
- Bombing Has Its Benefits

### CHAPTER REVIEW

There's a difference between nerves and actual anxiety: nerves are totally normal and just a product of excitement. Even Steve gets nervous before a performance. One way to help with nerves is to avoid looking at the audience. Look over their heads or into the darkness, because if you look at the people in the audience, you'll see people not laughing (even if they're enjoying the show!). Some audience members are pensive and thoughtful and may really love your show even if they don't laugh a lot while you're on stage.

Stay out of your head, don't let a lack of response get to you, and if you're actually bombing, don't acknowledge it. Keep your show going and pretend nothing's wrong. The primary benefit of bombing is knowing how your material works on the worst of nights. Don't engage with hecklers. Try talking loudly over them or quietly so the audience shuts them up for you. If you can avoid playing a show while people are eating dinner, do it. If you can't, know that they'll be distracted.

14.

## **NERVES, HECKLERS, AND BOMBING**

### ASSIGNMENT

- Recall your worst show. How badly did you bomb? Was there a relentless heckler in the audience? How did you get through it? If you haven't yet performed, try to remember a time you blew a presentation at school or work.

14.

## NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

15.

## A LIFE IN THE ARTS

*"I highly recommend a life of being in the arts and being with other artists, because they're funny, they have a happy life, they're creative, they think, they learn things, and it's a very exciting life."*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Love Your Rivals
- Embrace the Struggle
- Negative Feedback Is a Badge of Honor
- Don't Overanalyze Comedy
- Leave Artistry Behind When You're on Stage

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Whether it's your full-time job or a vocation, Steve recommends a life in the arts. Such an existence is filled with creativity, humor, and thoughtfulness. Within your artistic life, know your worth and set boundaries for success. Being a comedian is difficult — rejection, failure, isolation, frequent travel, criticism—but you have to embrace the struggle. Don't wallow in disappointment at the fact that there will always be someone better than you. Instead, learn from and be inspired by your rivals. The same goes for negative feedback. When someone tells you that you won't make it as a comedian, consider that criticism a badge of honor. Don't overanalyze your art. If something is funny or goes over with an audience, leave it at that. Lastly, don't worry yourself with artistry on stage. In the moment, your biggest concerns should be what's going over and what's coming next. All the artistry in your act takes place intellectually before and after you go on.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Read about the lives of six comedians from their perspectives.
- Check out this list of documentaries about stand-up comics.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Invite a local comedian out for coffee or a drink and ask them to speak about the life of a comic.

15.

## NOTES

## CREATING CHARACTERS

*“These qualities start to come to you strictly dictated by the voice and facial expression you’ve chosen to make.”*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- First, Just Be a Person
- You Can Carry Simultaneous Emotions
- Explore the Many Faces of Emotions
- Channel Your Own Weirdness
- Follow Quirks to Characters

### CHAPTER REVIEW

It can be easy to be overwhelmed by tiny movements and physical decisions when performing as a character: sitting in a chair, drinking a glass of water, etc. Just remember that you’re a person and act naturally. Steve recalls working with Barbara Harris in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and suggests that if you can bring your offscreen zaniness or unpredictability to your onscreen performance, it can create something electric.

It’s possible to carry contradictory emotions at the same time; you can be both upset and composed in an instant. Remember that emotion has a thousand faces. Anger doesn’t always manifest as yelling, so think about more interesting ways to physically express an emotion. Taking a look at a scene from the film *Father of the Bride*, Steve discusses the importance of physically staying within the bounds of a character. One way to develop a character is to start with a voice or physical quality that intrigues you, then build a character around it. Think: if a character has this quality, what else do I know about that character?

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Many famous comedians started out making up characters in their bedrooms as kids, then later incorporated those same characters into their acts. Did you create any characters as a child that you can revive? Check out some famous character performances on *Saturday Night Live* for inspiration.
- Steve thinks great characters are often based on qualities of people whom their creators know. Think of someone you know who interests you and create a list of his or her attributes. How can you use these for one of your characters?

16.

## CREATING CHARACTERS

### ASSIGNMENT

- Choose three favorite characters from movies, TV, or literature and make a list of characteristics and quirks for each of them. Include at least 10 traits on each of the three lists. Next, notice if there are common characteristics between the three lists and choose one single, specific trait. Using that trait, build an entirely new character around it. Let your mind explore—there are no wrong answers here.



16.

## NOTES

## STORY TECHNIQUES

*“Where should it go? Forget about where it is going. Where should it go?... What’s the next paragraph? What does this first paragraph imply for the next paragraph?”*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Work Backwards from an Idea
- Create a Basic Structure and Fill in the Blanks
- Ask Yourself: What Should Happen Next?
- Write Freely, Then Connect the Dots
- Let Your Characters Write Dialogue
- Clarity Is Key
- Give Your Subconscious Time to Work

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Like Steve did when he wrote *Bowfinger*, you can take a simple idea, joke, or subject from your act or life and expand it into an entire story. If you can establish the basic structure of your story or film—the beginning, middle, and end—your work becomes filling in the blanks and asking yourself what should happen next from scene to scene. Steve describes the difference between what could happen next, or what you want to happen, and what should happen next. The latter is a helpful technique for moving a story or script along.

Once you’ve written characters that are developed and have lives of their own, get out of their way and let them write dialogue by thinking about what they would say in a situation. Always aim for clarity, even when you’re being obscure. If you have a vague idea of where your writing is going, you have to let your artistic mind write without getting your intellect involved; then go back and notice connections in what you’ve written and shape the thing. If you’re working on a problem, it may not seem like you’re consciously thinking about it, but deep down your subconscious is gnawing away at it. Give it some time and you’ll find an answer. Don’t worry about writer’s block: it’s normal and you’ll find a way around it. Just give it some time.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Check out this selection of famous writers giving their thoughts on overcoming writer’s block.
- Study up on theories of story structure, particularly as applied to film:
  - Traditional Three-Act Structure
  - Michael Hague’s Five Key Turning Points
  - Joseph Campbell’s Twelve-Step Hero’s Journey
  - John Truby’s 22 Steps of Scriptwriting

Remember: there’s no one right way to structure a story, but if you’re looking for methods for creating the bones of your piece before filling in the gaps, those theories are good places to start.

17.

## **STORY TECHNIQUES**

### ASSIGNMENT

- Choose three favorite characters from movies, TV, or literature and make a list of characteristics and quirks for each of them. Include at least 10 traits on each of the three lists. Next, notice if there are common characteristics between the three lists and choose one single, specific trait. Using that trait, build an entirely new character around it. Let your mind explore—there are no wrong answers here.

17.

## NOTES

18.

## SCREENWRITING CASE STUDY: ROXANNE

*“The process of adaptation is the same process as a failed marriage, which is first fidelity, then transgression, and then divorce.”*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Make the Problem Worse
- Find Character Through Physicality
- Take Excursions From Story

### CHAPTER REVIEW

When he began writing *Roxanne*, Steve adhered closely to its original source material, Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*. As he continued, however, he diverged from the play, taking out a scene here and adding one there. This is the inevitable process of adaptation, and your work will take on a life of its own from draft to draft. If you’re having trouble with the essence of a character, approach him or her from a physical perspective. How does he or she move and interact with people? When editing your adapted screenplay, you can be either ruthless about cutting for story or indulgent with small digressions. Just make sure your choices are well thought out and add to the experience of the story.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Take a look at *Cyrano de Bergerac* and see if you can identify the connections between the play and the film *Roxanne*. Read *Cyrano* online, and a downloadable PDF of *Roxanne* under the video.
- Revisit a serious piece of fiction or drama you’ve read or watched recently. Think about the characters: what impact would it have on the world of the story if one of the serious characters were played by a comedian? How would it deepen or change the feeling of the piece?

### ASSIGNMENT

- Lots of films you already know were adapted from plays in the public domain. *The Lion King* draws from *Hamlet*, and *10 Things I Hate About You* is based on *The Taming of the Shrew*. Experience the process Steve describes firsthand by adapting a short story or scene from a play into a comedy sketch. Work with a scene in which the protagonist encounters a real problem and try making the problem worse, for comedic effect. Share the original source material (if you can find it online) and your adaptation with a friend. What are you most proud of? What was the biggest challenge? Share your thought process and the decisions you made while writing.

18.

## NOTES

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## EDITING

*“Editing is one of your most powerful tools to success. Changing, subtly reorganizing, taking out...it’s thrilling.”*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Speed Through the First Draft
- Read to Your Dog
- Ditch the Fancy Words
- Step Away for Objectivity
- Spare the Audience Predictable Scenes
- Don’t Cut Out the Heart
- Leave in Refrigerator Laughs
- Source Feedback  
One Person at a Time
- Find an Experienced Editor

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Don’t start editing while you’re writing. Speed through the first draft that you’re working on so you can get the whole picture of the piece, then start changing and shaping it. Once you have a written piece, read it aloud to hear how it flows and to note if there’s anything confusing slowing it down. Steer clear of smarty-pants words that obscure the meaning of what you’re writing. Aim for clarity, even when writing about something complicated or intellectual.

Time is on your side. Once you’ve written something, you’ll feel very emotionally attached to it. Put it down for a month and come back to it so you can look at it objectively and take out things that don’t work or don’t make sense. Steve used to think that a big, bang-up opening was the way to go, but now he’s of the mindset that you can ease the audience into your piece and let them understand one character at a time before blowing them away with spectacle.

Referencing *Bowfinger*, Steve talks about the power of cutting scenes that the audience already knows are coming, or abridging them for comedic effect. Exercise caution when cutting, however, as it’s possible to cut the heart out of your story. Don’t be afraid to leave in some rough edges that might give the story personality, or offbeat jokes that can create “refrigerator laughs” for the audience. If you’ve written something that you want feed-back on, don’t send it to five friends. Send it to one, take in that person’s feedback, then send it to the next person. If possible, find a professional or experienced editor who can bring some objectivity into the feedback without worrying about hurting your feelings.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Assuming it’s been a few days, revisit the sketch or scene you wrote as part of the assignment in Chapter 17. Read through it again and learn how the passage of time affects your feeling about the piece. What’s working? What’s not? What could be added or removed for clarity or comedy’s sake? Make edits accordingly.

## EDITING

### TAKE IT FURTHER (CONTINUED)

- Steve recommends reading your script aloud to hear things that you can't pick up by reading, including the flow of sentences and any stumbling blocks an audience might hit. Find the script of one of your favorite films or episodes of television and read it out aloud. Learn how successful language and the rhythm of dialogue are formed.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Steve suggests that you not send a written piece to multiple people at once for feedback, but send it to one person at a time instead. Send your scene or sketch to someone you know, asking for feedback. Be sure to get general notes, but also ask specific questions that you want answered. Are any of the moments predictable? Are there any words or phrases that are too complex or obscure? Make edits based on that feedback, then send your piece to another person for a second round of notes.



19.

## NOTES

## EDITING (CONTINUED)

*“The audience is your editor. They’re editing it for you! You hardly even have to think.”*  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Always Suspect the Line
- Student Session:  
Editing Beth’s Sketch
- The Audience Is Your Editor

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Everything you write is for other people, so make sure that you’re writing to entertain them, not just yourself. The audience is your editor. Pay attention to their reactions and edit accordingly. The best way to edit dialogue is by running it with actors. If an actor stumbles over certain lines, be wary of them. This is an indication that those pieces of dialogue could be adjusted to flow more smoothly.

In this chapter, Steve helps focus Beth’s sketch about the Titanic while retaining its essence. The problem with most sketches is that it’s difficult to find new and unique ways to exploit a funny premise without it feeling routine. It’s difficult to take the premise in a new direction or restate it without becoming predictable. After Steve’s editing, Beth’s sketch becomes more precise, allowing the speed to pick up. By making it more brief, taking out lines, and reassigning some to other characters, her sketch becomes fresher and more purposeful. Steve helps Beth move toward a more definitive ending, something that feels a little more conclusive.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Read through your sketch, find the lines that are just okay, and get rid of them, rewrite them, or assign them to another character. How does that affect the impact of the scene or sketch?
- Steve encourages writers to be flexible with the dialogue in their scripts and remain open to outside input. More often than not it is a key moment in a film or TV show that resonates with the audience, not the line itself. Review AFI’s Greatest 100 Movie Lines of All Time and see if you agree with Steve.

## EDITING (CONTINUED)

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Revisit your sketch or scene from Chapter 17 (the updated version) and find two friends to perform as the actors in the scene. They don't need to give elaborate performances; the important thing is that you hear your work read aloud by someone other than yourself. The first time they read your piece in front of you, just watch and listen. Note anything that sticks out as confusing or obscuring. Then ask them to read it again and see if there are any individual lines or words that trip them up. Home in on those moments and smooth them out or find a clearer way to say what you mean.
- Congratulations! By now you've successfully written and edited an original comedic sketch or scene. Pat yourself on the back! Then write some more.

20.

## NOTES

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## WRITING CASE STUDY: METEOR SHOWER

*"It's so much better when information is gathered rather than told."*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Insert Characters More to Give Them Life
- No Edit Is Too Small

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Using his recent play *Meteor Shower* as an example, Steve explains the importance of exposition and how it can be established inconspicuously via dialogue. By the top of page three of the script, the audience is already well versed in the dynamics of each married couple's relationship. This is achieved through deliberate choices in the characters' conversations that structure background information in an unobtrusive yet comprehensible way. Even the smallest of edits can help your work achieve this level of clarity.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Pick up a favorite play or book and read the first few pages. How many characters are introduced by page five? Is it confusing or can you easily keep track of who's who? What do you know about the characters or the situation that isn't explicitly said? How do you know what you know?
- Read (or reread) Steve's play *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. What do you notice about the exposition in the play?

### ASSIGNMENT

- Choose one character from your work in this class so far and write a one-page, single-spaced scene about that character preparing for someone else to arrive. Make the scene as detailed as you can and try to reveal as much about that character and the arriving character as possible. With the last two sentences of the scene, have the second character appear and deliver one line to the first character.

21.

## NOTES

## STEVE'S COMEDIC INSPIRATIONS

*"What these people did, whether they directly influenced me or indirectly influenced me, they made me love comedy and making people laugh."*

—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Early Influences
- Physical Comedy Influences
- Learning From Jack Benny and Steve Allen

### CHAPTER REVIEW

When Steve was a small child in the early 1950s, television shows contributed to his lifelong appreciation of comedy. He watched *The Little Rascals* and *The Steve Allen Show*. On trips in the car, Steve and his family listened to comedian Jack Benny on the radio. Steve appreciates Benny because he never turned to personal insults, always made himself the butt of the joke, and let his show's peripheral characters be funny, too. Jerry Lewis was another master comic who influenced Steve, particularly in physical comedy. Lewis's over-the-top slapstick approach was quite different from that of Oliver Hardy, of the famous Laurel and Hardy comedy duo, whose physical comedy was more subtle. He incorporated both men's styles in his own comedy. These household names made Steve love comedy and making people laugh. Small moments from individual shows or performances are what have stayed with Steve over the years.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- In this lesson, Steve talks about a scene from *The Patsy* (1964), in which comedian Jerry Lewis showcases his spectacular ability for physical comedy by stumbling into antique vases and catching them just before they shatter. Steve says he would like to see someone revive this gag, so start practicing (but start with something less fragile, please!).
- Steve cites Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy as two of his biggest comedic influences. He praises them for their subtlety and the gentleness of their physical moves. Watch their performances in the 1929 short *Big Business*. It's silent, so you can focus on Laurel and Hardy's physicality.

22.

## STEVE'S COMEDIC INSPIRATIONS

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Wrap up this class with a little more joke writing! Jack Benny influenced Steve's current performance style. Benny's timing, pretend vanity, and self-deprecating approach to comedy can be observed in any episode of *The Jack Benny Program*. Benny allowed himself to be the butt of the joke, and in this assignment, you'll adopt the same strategy. Make a list of your qualities and attributes—both physical and personality related—that would make excellent comedic fodder. Working from this list, write three jokes and film yourself performing them in a single video.



22.

## NOTES

## STEVE'S JOURNEY

“Everything meant something, every lesson was learned, every drunk person is dealt with—and you’re getting this backlog of experience that you don’t even know you have.”  
—Steve Martin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Falling in Love with Performing
- Developing as a Performer
- Experiencing Success
- Learning to Relax

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Although Steve did not grow up in an artistic household, he nevertheless developed an interest in comedy, magic, and performing. In college, he took philosophy courses that informed his comedy. He didn’t see a future in his magic act but started to notice that the audience enjoyed when his tricks failed. This prompted Steve to insert more comedic material into his act, and as he added more and more bits—playing his banjo, reading poetry, juggling—he began developing what was essentially a variety show. He became a comedy writer for *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* despite his inexperience. At the show he learned how to write sketches, but decided he’d rather be out front in the scenes than behind them. He left the gig and took his act on the road, performing in small towns and clubs, and growing his backlog of experience. Following his success as a stand-up comedian, he moved on to film. At this point in his life, Steve is still performing, but has finally learned how to relax.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Steve mentions incorporating material from the legendary comedy magician Carl Ballantine into his routine as a young performer (before he realized that jokes were property!). Search for Carl performing on *The Donnie and Marie Show*.
- Watch Steve on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in 1968.

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Write down your goals for your comedy career, for your life as a funny person, or the reasons you took this class. Make them specific and tie them to an immediate action you can take within the next week. How have you made steps toward them over the course of this class?

23.

## NOTES

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24.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

### CONGRATULATIONS!

*“Whatever your level of talent is, it can be overcome.”*

—Steve Martin

- You’ve finished your class with Steve Martin. We hope you feel inspired to set out to achieve your goals as a comedian, writer, or performer. The real world’s waiting for you. Good luck!

24.

## NOTES

## BONUS.

### CASE STUDY: SPEECHES

*"Set the scene inside  
your head. Imagine  
yourself there."*

—Steve Martin

#### SUBCHAPTERS

- Steve's Tribute to Tom Hanks at the Museum of Modern Art
- Start with Subject, Location, and Circumstance
- Test Material Inconspicuously

#### CHAPTER REVIEW

When figuring out what material to use in your speech, take all aspects of the event into consideration. Some jokes don't work for certain occasions and some language is inappropriate, depending on the function. Think about your audience: will you have their undivided attention, or will they be distracted by dinner and drinks? Imagine yourself there and plan your act accordingly. Rehearse in front of your friends and really observe their reactions. Steve knows that if he's at the point where he is asking others, "Do you think this is funny?" the joke could go either way.

#### TAKE IT FURTHER

- This is a great opportunity to employ Steve's recommendation of saying what's on everyone's mind. Think of some characteristics about a subject, location, or circumstance that everyone knows and start from there. Next time you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation—on the bus, in line at the grocery store, stuck in traffic—think, "What is everyone around me probably thinking right now? What would I say in a speech to lighten the mood in this random situation?"

## BONUS.

### CASE STUDY: SPEECHES

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#### ASSIGNMENTS

- You might not be winning lifetime achievement awards just yet, but Steve's tips for making speeches can be applied to almost any area of your life. Have a presentation to give at work? Introducing a film to friends at your weekly movie night? Carefully consider the audience and circumstance, try to insert jokes that are appropriate to the occasion, and work on a comedic delivery of your speech. The week before your speech, try individual jokes on people in your life—coworkers, the mailman, your granddaughter—and watch their reactions to gauge if the jokes are good. Go through three different formal rounds of editing the speech to tighten interstitial moments, and do at least one rehearsal in front of the mirror with an exclusive focus on your physicality. Then deliver!
- If you don't have a situation in mind, pick a fictional character from a favorite film, TV show, or book, and write a three-minute speech introducing that character to a particular audience. Give the presentation to your friends or family. Whoever your audience is, challenge yourself to give the speech in front of someone else.

## NOTES



## NOTES

## NOTES

## NOTES

## NOTES

# MASTERCLASS

STEVEN MARTIN TEACHES COMEDY

