Learn to add humor to your scripts from a comedy master and bring a smile to your face and a chuckle to your audience.

The Seven Laws of Comedy Writing

by David Evans

In the world of scriptwriting, conciseness of words is an asset. That being said, "I'll give you rule No. 1 right away:

1. Be able to throw out your best joke.

Sounds strange, doesn't it? And yet, I've found it to be profoundly true. Time and again when writing a script for The Monkees, Love American Style, The Bill Cosby Show or any of the numerous animated films I've done, I'll come up with one joke that seems sensational and clearly eclipses all the other jokes in the piece—but that doesn't exactly fit. I want it to fit. It would be wonderful if it fit. But it doesn't.

The overwhelming temptation is to use it anyway. After all, it's such a terrific joke, it seems a shame not to use it. But that's what craft is all about. Everyone knows a comedy script involves jokes, but it also involves characters, scenes, situation, development, dialogue and story. A sensational joke in the wrong script can throw everything else off and ruin the rhythm and the flow. What you need is not necessarily a lot of jokes, but the right jokes in the right places.

Being able to throw out your best joke is so important that I consider it one of the fundamental laws of comedy writing. There are others. In fact, there are seven laws of comedy writing that I keep bumping into and rediscovering over and over again. Some are surprising; others are obvious. The Seven Laws of Comedy Writing apply throughout the wide spectrum of comedy. You've met the first one; here are the other six.

2. If you don't laugh, nobody else will.

When I first started writing for television, as a staff writer for *The Monkees*, I had an experience that dramatically influenced my life in comedy ever since. I was sitting at the typewriter, working on a script. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and one of the secretaries came in. With a perplexed look on her face, she said, "You're laughing! You're sitting here in a room all by yourself and you're laughing!" I shrugged and said, "Of course I'm laughing! I'm a comedy writer. I write funny things and they make me laugh!"

Bingo! I didn't realize how important that was then, but I've though about it countless times since. In order to write comedy that makes other people laugh, you must

be close touch with your own comedy instincts. I write things that I myself laugh at. If I laugh at them, you might, too.

By contrast, a couple years after I wrote for *The Monkees*, I was working on a script for a show that I didn't really like. It didn't seem like a funny show or even a potentially funny show. So I found myself sitting at the typewriter one day, trying to think of something that the producer would think was funny (since he was my employer). A bell went off in my head: I realized I was starting to short-circuit my own comedy instincts, trying to second-guess what somebody else would laugh at. I ended up leaving that project because I felt I needed to.

As a professional comedy writer, you might become involved in a project that you don't find funny for any number of reason: The money seems too good to turn down; your agent presses you to do it; it seems like a good "career move." But those are all dangerous reasons. You will start relying on "comedy writer's tricks," instead of your own sense of humor. If you're writing comedy and you're not genuinely, spontaneously laughing at what you're writing, something is radically wrong. You need to have fun with your own comedy, because your own true sense of humor is the single greatest asset any comedy writer can ever have.

3. Character is 98 percent of comedy….

One of the most famous lines in the history of comedy is from *The Jack Benny Show*. Throughout his career, Benny developed the persona of a ultimate skinflint. On one show, a robber pulled a gun on Benny and threatened, "Your money or your life." Finally Benny spoke, "I'm thinking it over…."

For the cheapskate Benny persona, this was a tough decision that required some real thought. And it is a perfect example of comedy derived from charter. This was not a joke superimposed onto a situation; it grew organically out of the Benny character.

Another example from a different medium and a different era is the Woody Allen movie *Bullets Over Broadway* in which a young playwright seeks backing for this play, and the only place he can get the money is from a mobster. But the mobster will back the play only if his floozy girlfriend goes to play the lead. Since the mobster is insanely jealous, he sends along a thug bodyguard to watch the girlfriend. The bodyguard, who is constantly around rehearsals, starts to have ideas about how to rewrite the script-and this complete thug turns out to have great writing talent, even more than the playwright. The comedy is completely driven by the character of the bodyguard. That's comedy-funny characters acting like themselves.

4. ...and timing is the other 98 percent

Lets take another look at the Jack Benny segment. After the crook issues his ultimatum, there is a long silence. This is a beautiful example of timing-setting something up and then giving the humor the time it needs. It's important to write this silence into the

script. Inexperienced or insecure writers often set up something that requires a reaction, but fail to write in the reaction. Silence is one of the most important parts of comedy, and it's an aspect of art of the musical silences of Miles Davis.

Consider *Bullets Over Broadway* again. The initial, superficial comedic hook is the incongruity between the worlds of the theater and the mob. But the real comedy of the movie comes from the unfolding character of the bodyguard, and this is done gradually throughout the whole film. If we knew the things about the bodyguard at the beginning that we know at the end, they would seem preposterous and unbelievable. But we don't. We learn only a little bit at a time, so that by the end of the movie we believe it totally. This movie is like a time-released capsule.

Another aspect of timing is repetition, and what comedy writers call "the rule of three"- the repetition of something three times, with a switch at the end of the sequence. Euclid and Aristotle loved the number three, and so did Oliver Hardy and Groucho Marx. For example, picture Oliver Hardy having to walk across a narrow patch of sidewalk covered with ice. He realizes that it is dangerous and studies the ice with great concern and apprehension before he even starts across. Then he crosses very slowly and carefully, fear in every step. Once across, he breaths a sigh of relief and puffs himself up with pride in his accomplishment. He goes back over the ice a second time, now with more confidence. Again he is successful. He is now very proud of himself. Jauntily, he walks across the ice a third time-and this time falls flat on his face!

What if he'd fallen the first time he crossed the ice, without any of the repetitions or the buildup? Not nearly as funny, is it? You need to build up to it. That's what the rule of three is all about.

5. The power of the step sheet.

When I first started in television I had a wonderful mentor, Jim Frizzel, one of the great, classic comedy writers, who'd written for everything from *Mr. Peepers* and *The Andy Griffith Show* to *M* A* S* H**. He showed me a powerful tool that I started using on *The Monkees* and have been using ever since-the "step sheet."

It's absurdly simple, but extremely helpful. You write down the sequence of scenes you're going to have in your comedy script. Then you write down in just a sentence or two what happens in each scene. You might have three or four sentences if a lot is happening in a particular scene. But the step sheet is not a listing of the jokes or dialogue--just story points and character points. For example, a step sheet for Bullets Over Broadway would show only the progressive changes from scene to scene in the characterization of the thug bodyguard, as he becomes more and more involved in the writing process

Remember the importance of character and timing in comedy? (You should; after all, you only read about them a minute or so ago.) The step sheet is the tool you use to

make sure your characters and timing work with maximum effectiveness. It's one of the most powerful tools in comedy writing.

6. Hold the jokes and make the story funny!

A common misconception in comedy is that the more jokes in a piece, the better. But I believe that the opposite is often true. I've written thousands of jokes, and a good joke can be truly wonderful. Yet the most satisfying comedy comes not from jokes but from a funny character, funny characters reacting to one another or a funny story. Again, *Bullets Over Broadway* is instructive. It's a very funny movie and its uses virtually no jokes.

A good test of whether a humorous piece is solid is if you can tell just the story, without any of the jokes, and still have it be funny. If so, you're in good shape. But if it requires jokes to make it funny, then you need to go back to the beginning and completely rethink it. Jokes are the horseradish sauce of comedy, not the roast beef.

7. Turn off your TV and keep it off!

I've talked to many young people about comedy, and I've found that their projects relate to things that have already been on TV. Their work tends to be overwhelmingly derivative. Agents say the same thing. Prospective writers watch a lot of TV, and then when they write scripts, their scripts all look alike. My advice: Turn off your TV and keep it off!

Instead of getting your ideas from TV, develop your own comic vision. Consider Woody Allen: One of his greatest strengths is that he is authentic. He's not trying to be Jack Benny and he's not trying to be George Burns. He's Woody Allen. He is very Jewish, very New York, endlessly self-analytical and highly neurotic, and his comedy is an organic outgrowth of his persona. By contrast, I'm a preacher's kids from Kansas. Inevitably my comedy looks a lot different from Woody Allen's. It's supposed to. I heard a young Latino comic named Chris Fonseca. He has cerebral palsy, has difficulty speaking and does his routine from a wheelchair. Much of his material deals with his comedic take on the stresses of living with his physical condition. He is wonderfully funny, because his comedy grows directly out of his own real life.

I believe that there is great power in being true to your comic vision and being in touch with your individual sources of comic inspiration. They might be obvious, as in the case of Chris Fonseca, or more subtle. It is because of the importance of comic authenticity that I urge you not to watch TV. I'm not saying never--it's good to know some of the things that are on. But don't derive your comic inspiration and models from TV. Read books; look at the Marx Brothers movies and the classic silent film comedies; look at print cartoons like the ones in *The New Yorker*; read children's books; look at the fabulous, comic theater pieces of Feydeau. Above all, look at yourself and the people around you! Real people and the absurdities and follies of everyday life are the richest sources of comedy.

These are the Seven Laws of Comedy Writing. They don’t exhaust all the possible topics involved in comedy writing, but they cover the most important. If you follow these laws, they will guide you to write fun, funny comedy that will make you laugh--and make your audiences laugh along with you.

About the Author

Dave Evans was a judge (in the writing category) for the *Emmy Awards* for several years and has many comedy writing credits including *The Bill Cosby Show*.