

# THE NEW COMEDY BIBLE

The Ultimate Guide to Writing  
& Performing Stand-up Comedy



"Judy Carter helps  
others find their  
authentic persona  
and communicate it  
in a way that makes  
audiences laugh."

— Lily Tomlin

# JUDY CARTER

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The Ultimate Guide to Writing  
& Performing Stand-up Comedy

JUDY CARTER



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# DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to all the comedians who have triumphed over personal fears to reveal their authentic selves onstage, transforming their personal problems into punchlines. They're the lawyers, doctors, accountants, and teachers who realized humor equals confidence, and that it makes life easier and more enjoyable. They're the housewives, retirees, and grandparents who braved ageism and sexism to speak their hilarious truth. They're the angry, wounded, political, and neurotic people who know laughter *is* the best medicine, because they've seen it cure their own lives.

*The New Comedy Bible* is also a tribute to my readers, both old and new, who will now make the world a happier and better place, one laugh at a time.

Thank you, my funny friends.

# Other Books by Judy Carter

*Stand-up Comedy: The Book* (Dell Publishing)

*The Homo Handbook* (Simon and Schuster)

*The Comedy Bible* (Simon and Schuster)

*The Message of You: Turn Your Life Story into a Money-Making Speaking Career* (St. Martin's Press)

*The Message of You Journal: Finding Extraordinary Stories in an Ordinary Day* (Comedy Workshops Publishing)

*The Comedy Bible Workbook* (Comedy Workshops Publishing)

IN THE BEGINNING,  
there was ***The Comedy Bible***  
which was published in 2001...

**The world has changed.**

Comedy has also changed, so  
here is ***The NEW Comedy Bible***.  
(Completely new.)



Stand-up comedy is about breaking rules. But  
before you break them, learn them.

**Judy Carter**

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**Acknowledgments**

# IMAGINE THIS...

You're waiting in the wings.

The emcee announces you.

You step into the spotlight and feel everyone's eyes on you.

You do your opening joke.

Crickets.

Are you bombing? Is the mic on?

After what feels like an eternity, the audience explodes into uproarious laughter. Your next joke lands. And the next one! You're a big hit!

You leave the stage to thunderous applause.

"Follow your passion, stay true to yourself, never follow someone else's path. Unless you're in the woods and you're lost and you see a path, then by all means you should follow that."

—Ellen DeGeneres

Back in the green room, a manager enters, looking for you. That leads to meetings with top talent agencies begging to sign you. Suddenly, you're

doing your first comedy special. Rave reviews are everywhere, and millions of fans follow you online. You go on tour, playing to sold-out 1,500-seat theaters. Offers stream in from HBO, Netflix, and movie producers.

You're a bankable star.

## Why Shouldn't Success Happen to You?

Do you feel it's possible to have a successful comedy career? Or are you hearing your mother say, "Forget your dreams and go to law school"? Are you being undermined by voices that say:

- "I'm not funny enough."
- "I'm too old."
- "I'm too fat."
- "I have too many responsibilities to do this."
- "I need to make money with a day job."

"Life opens up opportunities to you, and you either take them or you stay afraid of taking them."

—Jim Carrey

Students in my comedy workshops have experienced all these fears. But they worked hard, followed my coaching, and are now headlining clubs across the country, starring in network comedy specials, sitcoms, getting development deals, and appearing in movies.

The material in this book helps shake off those doubts (which are *normal*). Follow my coaching and you'll find your authentic comedy voice, create killer material, and explore the possibilities of being seen and getting booked.

This is the beginning of the ride of your life.

# JOBS FOR FUNNY PEOPLE

Even if you don't want a stand-up comedy career, learning how to write and perform stand-up opens up many job opportunities.



“So many doors can be opened up from stand-up comedy, and the first one that was opened up for me was acting. But you can go from acting to being a TV personality to being a radio personality to being a writer to being a producer, to just being a visionary, to voiceover work.”

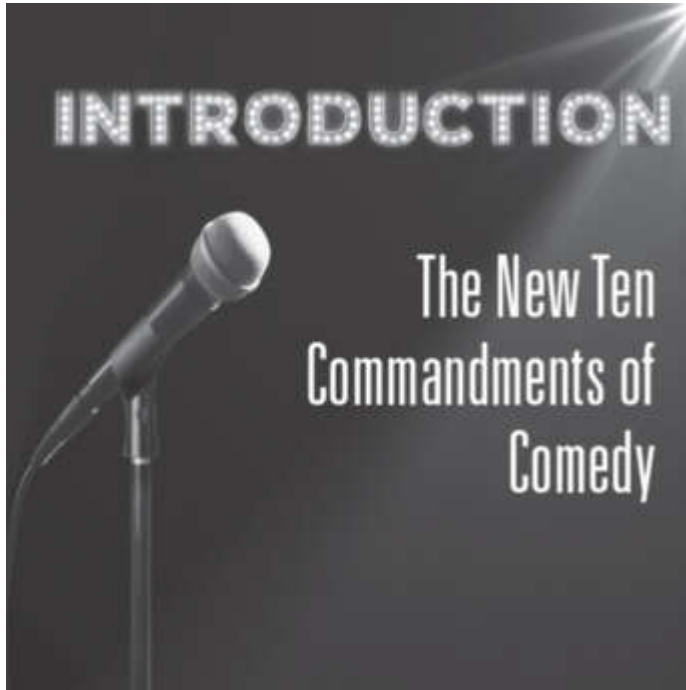
—Kevin Hart





# INTRODUCTION

## The New Ten Commandments of Comedy



# The New Ten Commandments of Comedy

## 1. Thou Shalt Not Steal

Don't "borrow" jokes from other comics, from the internet, or from the examples in this book. The audience wants to hear *your* original story and voice. That's your bankable asset. Among comics, stealing is the original sin.

## 2. Thou Shalt Not Lie

Truth is stranger, and funnier, than fiction. Authenticity is the secret sauce of your act. Audiences want to know *you* and can tell if you're being disingenuous.

"The hardest thing to do is to be true to yourself, especially when everybody is watching."

—Dave Chappelle

## 3. Thou Shalt Become a Social Media Star

Build a major presence on social media platforms. Post or upload videos and connect with your followers every day. Your cell phone is your publicist, so talk to it, record observations and post them *every single day*.

YouTube star and influencer Jenna Marbles told me when she came over for a comedy consultation that

she got her degree in nursing. She never got to that career because when she released her 2010 YouTube video, “How to Trick People into Thinking You’re Good Looking,” within the first week, it was viewed 5.3 million times. Now she has more than 17 million subscribers, 2.2 billion video views, and has made millions of dollars.

#### **4. Thou Shalt Pay Your Dues**

Stage time has no substitute. When you fail, get back onstage and try again. Keep what works and lose or rewrite what doesn’t. The recipe for success is: Bomb • Try again • Cry • Try again • Eat a pizza • Try again • Repeat! Don’t give up!

#### **5. Thou Shalt Network**

At every open-mic night, be friendly to the emcee/host, stay and watch the other comics, and thank the club owner. You need them as much as you need fans, if not more. One of these people may become a player in the industry and hire the people they like. No joke. Many New York comics wish they had been nicer to that bartender at the Improv who went on to run HBO. Networking is essential to your long-term success.

#### **6. Thou Shalt Bash the Powerful**

Comedy has always poked fun at the rich and powerful, holding them accountable. It’s called “punching up.” On the flip side, bashing those you perceive as less fortunate, based on religion, race, and sexual orientation, isn’t smart. Don’t use your comedy to oppress others.

## 7. Thou Shalt Never Use Age as an Excuse

You're never too young, or too old, to be funny. The late, great American comic Rodney Dangerfield got his big break when he was forty-four. Lewis Black was forty-eight when his appearances on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart turned him into a household name. At the tender age of sixty, my former student Vicki Barbolak got a standing ovation after her audition for *America's Got Talent*. Lori Mae Hernandez performed on *America's Got Talent* at the age of thirteen and made the judge's cut, later performing at LA's Dolby Theatre. At any age, if you're funny, there's an audience for you.

“ (It's weird that people want me to babysit...) I'm not a high school graduate. I haven't even been to high school. I don't have a driver's license. I can't even sit in the front seat. I'm still on safety scissors people! But you're going to leave your beloved child to me? My only qualification for being a babysitter is...I used to be a baby!

—Lori Mae Hernandez

## 8. Thou Shalt Work “Clean”

On the road to fame, you need paying gigs. That anal sex joke may be hilarious, but it will rule out lucrative corporate gigs. Save your “blue” material for the clubs. (Remember, cleanliness is next to godliness.)

## 9. Thou Shalt Not *Try* to be Funny

Trying too hard to get laughs on a stage is equivalent to trying too hard to get love on a date. Either way, you'll end up rejected. Develop material to communicate your opinions and ideas in a way that's

authentically funny. (See Commandment 2.) Your natural humor must shine through.

## 10. Thou Shalt Write *Every* Day

No resting on the seventh day. Comedy is a 24/7 job! Your funny bone is not so much a bone as a muscle. Use it or lose it. Write *every day*, do all the exercises in this book, and work with your Comedy Buddy regularly. Do the heavy lifting so when opportunity knocks, you'll be ready.

### **Warning: Don't Write Comedy Alone—*Click into Action***

Go to [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) to learn how to find a Comedy Buddy and to find where you can share your work as well as get helpful insights. Head over now for an opportunity to get my complimentary audio download of "Breaking Through Procrastination."

## Full Disclosure

### ***"Will this book make me funny?"***

No. This book will *not* make you funny. Funny is something you are or aren't. Being funny is a talent, a way of looking at the world that cannot be taught. But, if you *are* funny, then this book will show you how to successfully workshop, write, and develop stand-up comedy material through tried and true exercises. These exercises will develop your comedy persona as well as enough material for a one-hour comedy special. These are the same exercises that helped develop many of the current stars of comedy today.

*Let's find out just how funny you are.*

# So...You Think You're Funny?

## EXERCISE 1: Where Are You on the Funny Scale?

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This Funny Scale preliminary test identifies your strengths and weaknesses, bringing awareness to the joke writing process.

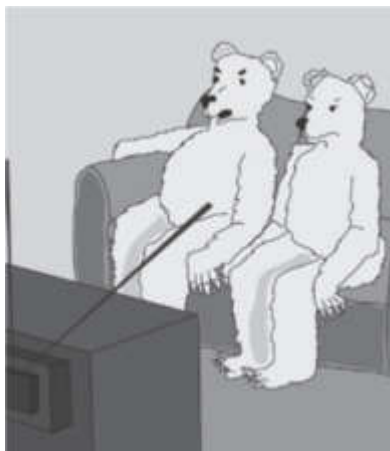
### 1. List of Three Punchlines (Turns)

Write a punchline to this setup: *Three things will survive a nuclear bomb: venereal disease, cockroaches, and...*

*List Three Different Answers*

### 2. Writing Captions (Visual Humor)

Write two funny captions for this picture.





### **3. Dialoguing Funny (Act-Outs)**

Your mom says, “You’re going out in that?!”

*Write Two Witty Responses*

### **4. Stand-up (Mixes)**

Finish this setup: *An ink pen is like sex because...*

*List Five Examples*

### **5. Self-Mocking (Contrary Thinking)**

*I’m chubby, but there are some advantages to being overweight...*

*List Three Funny Advantages to Being Overweight*

### **6. Acronym Jokes (One-Liners)**

*KFC, CPA, and VIP actually stand for...*

*Write Out Funny Definitions for These Acronyms*

### **7. Political Humor (Comparison Jokes)**

*My mother and the leader of our country have something in common, they both...*

*Write Two Funny Responses*

### **8. Family Jokes**

*The weird thing about my father is...*

*Write Two Funny Things*

### **9. Religious Jokes**

*Last night, God gave me advice. S/he said...*

*Act Out God Giving You Advice*

## 10. Sex Jokes

*Is it me or is it really unattractive when someone says...?*

*Write Two Funny Responses*

## Your Funny Test Results

Count up how many jokes/responses you wrote. What is that number?

---

### 18 And Above

You might have what it takes to be a pro. Even if some of your jokes aren't killers, the fact that you didn't stop at just one answer shows your commitment level. Trust me when I say your tenacity and your will to succeed will take you a long way. (And not just in comedy.)

### 10 To 17

The willingness exists, but you're giving up too easily. It often takes *ten tries* before anything even remotely funny emerges. Maybe you're being too critical and it's blocking you from "getting to the funny." Go back and give yourself permission to suck! Pretend you're in the Planet Fitness "Judgement-Free Zone" and write, without as many "bad" answers as you can. You'll be amazed at what happens.

### Fewer Than 9

You may still be a very funny person, but practice writing a little longer to move beyond the resistance stopping you from completing the exercise. Writing practice is a necessity on the road to success.

**If you didn't do this test at all, and promised yourself you'll do it later...**

Congratulations! You have the personality of a true comic! All comics procrastinate. As the saying goes, “Dying is easy, comedy is hard.” That said, do *not* put this book aside and move on to your second-choice career. Go back and fill in your answers. Even if you write the most *unfunny* answers ever, what’s important is you *don’t quit*. You could be a rebel, an asymmetrical thinker, a “bad” student...and also a hidden gem. A star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame awaits. But first, do the hard work of completing the exercises to see what you’ve got.

***“So, I just wrote my first jokes. What do I do with them?”***

Want to post your best answers? Go to [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) to learn how. By sharing your jokes and reading what others have posted, you just might see that you are:

- Funnier than you thought you were.
- Better at creating certain types of material.
- Inspired to work harder.

No matter how you did on this funny test, you’re going to improve, and your material will get better with practice. That’s a promise.

## The Comedy Bible Workbook

Keep track of the funny stuff you write with ***The Comedy Bible Workbook*** which is available as a download or, for those who like to write free-hand, as a paperback workbook at [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com).

*Now I need something from you.*

## EXERCISE 2: Commit to Your Comedy Vision

---

### 1. Visualize this...

I'm going to ask you to close your eyes and visualize having the comedy career you want. Imagine yourself becoming successful.

- What does success look like?
- How do you feel?
- Who is around you?
- What are your most private thoughts at your moment of success?

Some will picture doing their set in front of an audience that's crying with laughter. Others may see their first paycheck. For many, it's becoming famous enough to be recognized on the street.

### 2. Spend ten minutes writing your success vision as if it were a diary entry. Example:

*"Tonight, I'm recording my second Netflix comedy special in New York City. I'm nervous, but prepared. I spent the day going over my set with my Comedy Buddy and my manager. No partying afterward as I've got an early flight tomorrow to California. I got a gig at Caesar's in Vegas. I'm loving life right now!"*

### 3. Write a goal you will achieve one year from now. Example:

*"On this date next year, I will have performed at least 100 times."*

### 4. Write that goal in your calendar one year from today.

We'll discuss your calendar more in detail in the next chapter, Getting Past Procrastination.

### ***Holding on to Your Vision of Success***

Jim Carrey once relayed a story to Oprah about his comedy debut at Yuk Yuk's Club in Toronto. His father drove him, and then watched him bomb. Carrey worried he didn't have the goods to make a living as an entertainer. But in 1985, just four years later, Carrey, broke and depressed, drove his beat-up Toyota to Hollywood. To pump himself up, the nineteen-year-old wrote himself a check for \$10 million for "acting services rendered." He post-dated it ten years and shoved it in his wallet.

Carrey went on to earn well over \$10 million for movies like *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* and *Dumb and Dumber*. When his father passed away in 1994, Carrey told Oprah he slipped the check into his father's casket.

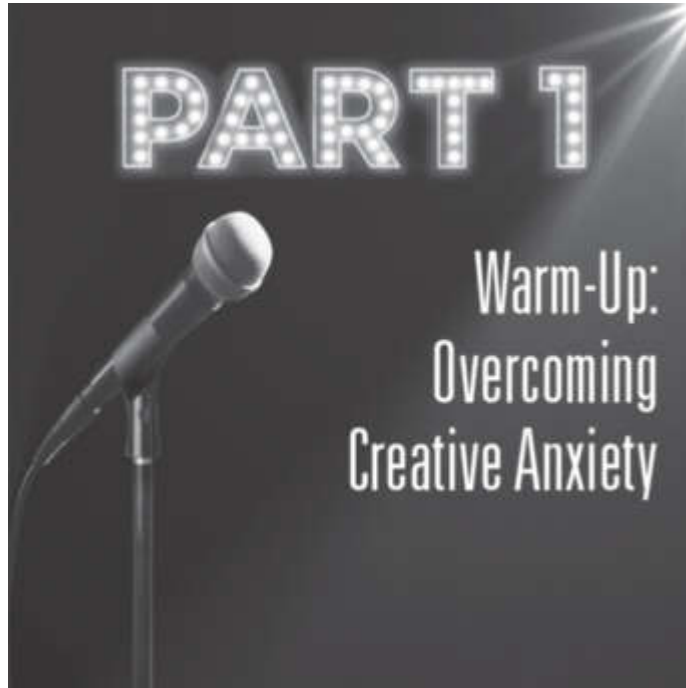
## **5. Make a Commitment!**

Don't keep your success plan a secret! Go to [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) and fill out a commitment form! You'll receive a motivational message to help you attain your goals. (Just return my phone calls when you get famous.)

*Now...Let's turn your comedy vision into a reality!*

# PART 1

Warm-Up:  
Overcoming  
Creative Anxiety



# Getting Past Procrastination: The Seinfeld Strategy

Creativity can be anxiety producing. It's no wonder most comics procrastinate when it comes to writing new material. Or any material.

Most of us know that Jerry Seinfeld is one of the richest comics in the world. He's also one of the most prolific. He regularly tours with new material, creates video content, and produces specials for fellow comedians. How does Seinfeld avoid the pitfall of procrastination?

When Seinfeld was interviewed for my first book on comedy, he revealed some of his secrets. One of those was, creating great material means writing *every day*. Seinfeld sets an egg timer for twenty minutes and writes without stopping until he hears the "Ding!" No matter what his schedule is for the day, this is a sacrosanct part of his daily routine.

On the weblog *Lifehacker*, comic Brad Isaac shared a story about meeting Seinfeld backstage, and asking if he had "any tips for a young comic?"

Seinfeld told him the way to be a better comic is to create better jokes, and the way to create better jokes is to *write every day*.

Isaac went on, "He told me to get a big wall calendar that has a whole year on one page and hang it on a prominent wall. The next step was to get a big red magic marker. He said for each day that I do my task of writing, I get to put a big red X over that day. After a few days you'll have a chain. Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer and longer. You'll like seeing



that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job is not to break the chain.”

Notice Seinfeld didn’t say anything about writing “good” material. The secret to the Seinfeld Strategy is to banish all expectations of being brilliant. It’s about simply committing to write every day so you “don’t break the chain.”

“Comedy writing is something you don’t see people doing. It’s a secretive thing.

**—Jerry Seinfeld**

Successful writing comes from perspiration, not inspiration. Don’t let your anxiety, a fight with your partner, a bad day at work, or partying the night before take away your commitment to a daily writing schedule. Matter of fact, when you write, you’ll probably find all those things that used to distract you from writing *are material*. The Seinfeld Strategy works because it puts the emphasis on developing an essential habit for success. Thus, your only judgment about yourself is: Did you or didn’t you write today?

***“But Judy, I have a spouse, kids, and lots of work stress. I don’t have time to write every day.”***

No excuses! Your phone has a notes app, right? Standing in line at the grocery store, type out some observations about your surroundings. Instead of reading an old magazine at the doctor’s office, write! Or use your phone’s voice recorder and speak your thoughts. Personally, I like recording (versus jotting it down) so I can hear the energy, the attitude, and the delivery of my idea when it happens.

“Nobody can stop you but you. And shame on you if you’re the one who stops yourself.”

—Damon Wayans

There are many apps to convert spoken words to text. Google “transcription software” or “transcription services” and you’ll find many options.

The *stop procrastinating system* includes:

- A wall calendar (yes, actual paper yearly calendar on the wall that confronts you every day).
- A red marker (yes, an actual writing instrument so you’re interacting with the calendar).
- A notebook (or use your computer, tablet—whatever you are most comfortable writing on).
- A timer.
- Set your writing timer for ten minutes (you can continue writing after the timer goes off, but *do not* stop before it goes off).
- Write without stopping, no exceptions, write everything, even if it’s, “I can’t think of anything to write.”
- **X** out today on your calendar.



**Don't break the chain.**

It's not about great writing; it's about the consistency of that writing. I once rewrote a joke for two years before telling it.

**—Jerry Seinfeld**

*Let's now organize your comedy journal by creating your Comedy Bible Workbook.*

## **EXERCISE 3: Setting Up Your Comedy Bible Workbook**

---

Funny stuff happens any time of the day or night. So, for the next month you're no longer a civilian. You're a comedy writer. That means carrying a recording device or a notepad and capturing funny stuff *as it happens*. Some comics even text or email themselves a funny thought or observation as soon as it occurs. That means in the middle of a dinner

conversation, church, or even in the middle of sex—roll over and *write it down!* (No wonder so many comics are single.)

“I don’t go, ‘I’m gonna write a joke.’ I just go through the world and see stuff. It’s like I exercise the part of my mind of noticing things, to the point where I’m now noticing things without even trying to notice them.

—Stephen Wright

You might say to yourself, “I’ll remember this...” *But you won’t.* Trust me. Record it! Then, when doing your morning writing, listen to the recording, transcribe it, add to it, and punch it up. That means keeping track and organizing your ideas is paramount. I often go back to the raw rantings written five years ago and find gold.

### Keeping Track of Your Material

Joan Rivers typed up over a million jokes on three-by-five cards and stored them in a card cabinet. She arranged them by subject, which Rivers said was the hardest part of organizing: ***“Does this one go under ‘ugly’ or does it go under ‘dumb’?”***

### Setting Up Your Comedy Bible Workbook

Creating comedy is a very messy process. I used to write jokes on whatever paper or computer was in front of me. I had scribblings on junk mail, on utility bills, and in thousands of files on my computer. It was

chaos. Jokes got lost, forgotten, and needless to say, never delivered. (Someone at the gas company has probably been doing my jokes for years and wondering why I haven't sent updated material.) Here's a surefire way to organize all the material you're going to generate from this book.

Note: These instructions are for using a word processing program. If you don't have a computer or tablet, go old school and use a three-ring binder, divide it into sections, and fill each section with three-hole punched paper.

### **Download Now: *The Comedy Bible Workbook***

If you want to make it super easy for yourself, you can purchase a pre-organized ***The Comedy Bible Workbook***. Many students find it helpful because:

- A pre-formatted book helps facilitate the exercises
- Less chance of skipping or procrastinating
- Seeing your material in one dedicated workbook inspires you to ***keep going***

Go to [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) and order The Comedy Bible Workbook in the print version or downloadable online version.

**Note:** If you have a copy of *The Comedy Bible Workbook*, then skip the following section and head to the next chapter.

Create a folder on your computer and title it “Comedy Bible Workbook.” Make a subfolder (or tab if using a binder) for each of the sections above:

- Exercise 1: Funny Test
- Exercise 2: Comedy Career Vision

Be prepared—you’ll be adding material from upcoming chapter exercises into this workbook. Here’s a brief overview of folders you’ll now create on your computer:

**Exercises** Your responses to all the exercises in this book.

**Ideas** Your daily writings and transcriptions of ideas you recorded.

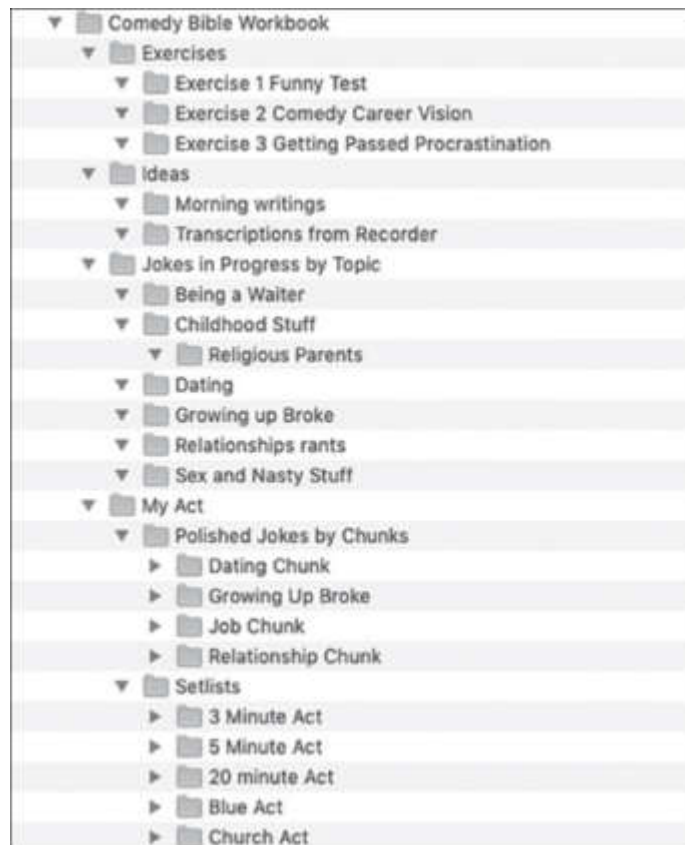
**Jokes in Progress by Topic** You’ll learn how to find *your* topics to write jokes about, and you’ll keep them in this folder. You’ll also transfer here anything that has possibilities from your “Ideas” and “Exercises” folders.

**My Act** As the ultimate landing place for your polished jokes, this folder contains only material that’s ready to perform.

**Set List** This will contain your various set lists. A set list is the running order of your act on a given night for different types of gigs. (More about set lists later in this book.)

It should look like this:

**Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise XX:**



## Getting Funny

Note: You'll see prompts like this throughout the book. It's an indication to go to your Comedy Bible Workbook, in the folder indicated after the >, and create a document (or add a piece of paper to your binder) with the name indicated. Then record your answers for the exercises there. You're building your act step-by-step through these exercises, daily writing, and culling methods, so no skipping!

*Now that you have organized your own Comedy Bible Workbook, or bought the print version, let's start with filling in your Morning Writings.*

# EXERCISE 4: Morning Writings—Waking and Creating

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > Ideas > Morning Writings/ Transcription from Notes/Recordings

Before your coffee, write! Write anything down, including your observations, thoughts, and dreams. This is not high art, but a path to a clearer mind, better ideas, and less anxiety.

In the folder “Ideas,” create a document called “Morning Writings” and put tomorrow’s date on the first page. Create another document in that folder called “Transcriptions from Notes/Recordings” and put tomorrow’s date on the first page.

1. Start each day writing for at least ten minutes in your Comedy Bible Workbook’s “Morning Writings” section. Then, transfer your notes/recordings from the previous day to this section in your Comedy Bible Workbook in the document called “Transcriptions from Notes/Recordings.” These writings can be anything from half-baked joke ideas to lists of things that happened during the day. It’s not so important *what* you write, but *that* you write. While working on your material, you’ll transfer “raw sewage comedy” to the “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder, then to the “My Polished Jokes” folder.
2. Whenever you get an idea during the day, write it down or record it. Mark the date on your calendar.
3. Repeat each day.



Remember, if setting up your *Comedy Bible Workbook* is too time consuming, then go to [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) and order the print version of The Comedy Bible Workbook. It's so user-friendly, you can even do these exercises when stoned!

*You're on your way. Now for something scary.*

# Get A Gig

That's not just a chapter heading, that's a command, from me, your bossy comedy coach. Do it *now*! As with anything scary, the best way to do it is *quickly*. I'm telling you to get a gig *before* you've even written your first word of material. Or, if you're already a comic, commit to putting a gig on your calendar where you'll do *new* material by following the guidelines in this book.

***“What? Are you, insane? I don’t have an act! Why in the hell would I book myself for a gig?”***

Take this leap of faith and book an open mic where you'll perform for three to five minutes. Why?

Fear of public humiliation is the *best* way to stop procrastinating and get you to take the first step of your journey.

If you're a comic, you're probably critical of yourself, and there will never be a time you'll feel confident enough or prepared enough. Matter of fact, my first time doing stand-up was with *no* act. No rehearsal. No material.

## **Thrown onstage with no act**

See, I started my career as a magician, which meant shuffling huge suitcases from gig to gig. For one of my tricks, I'd escape from a garbage can tied up with twist ties. Picture it—loading garbage cans into a cab and checking it curbside at JFK.

On one occasion, I arrived at the world-famous Chicago Playboy Club for a performance that was to include the legendary Hugh Hefner in the audience. Too bad my luggage didn't arrive. I went to the club, sans tricks, and told the manager United Airlines had lost my bags. He let me know in that not-so-subtle Chicago gangster manner that I was going on, "tricks or no tricks." I went into the Bunny Locker Room (truly, it existed) and cried out of fear that my career would end that night. In that moment, I realized my choices were to get the hell out of there (definitely ending my career) or go out on stage and tell the truth (also ending my career).

Though terrified, I stepped into the spotlight and said, "United Airlines is a better magician than I am. They made all my tricks vanish. Unless one of you has a deck of cards, a saw and some handcuffs, I got nothing." The audience laughed. I started telling them, in detail, about the tricks I would have done and how amazed they would have been. More and more laughter. My authenticity created a connection. And yes, Hugh Hefner was in the audience that night. He even invited me to stay in the Leather Room (which, disappointingly, was cheap vinyl).

Taking the risk of going on in spite of my fear and lack of material turned out to be magical, and I continued to work Playboy Clubs all across the United States—as a comic—with only carry-on luggage.

"I've arrived at the place if I'm not taking a risk, I'm not happy. If I'm scared, then I know I'm being challenged."

—Jim Carrey

**What are you waiting for? Take *bold action* now!**

No matter what, you need a gig going on your calendar by the end of the day. Think of it as improv on steroids. Adrenalin is the mother's milk of comedy. Sign yourself up now for an open mic night or for giving a toast at a wedding. Heck, even giving a presentation for your department or auditioning for a local talent show counts! You must visualize performing as we go through the Part One exercises. Don't wait for confidence or inspiration. A deadline looming on your calendar, with the threat of public humiliation attached to it, is essential to create the right level of motivation.

*Now is the time to take that self-affirming first step.*

# Stand-up Comedy Venues

The world is full of high-level comedy clubs where the stars perform. It's a privilege to be on their main stages. Well-established comedians compete to appear there, so it's unrealistic to think you'll perform at any of these venues until you're a seasoned professional. Here are some ideas for you.

## **Places to Perform When You're Just Starting Out: Bringer Shows**

Many clubs have smaller rooms, such as the Comedy Store's Belly Room in LA, and Gotham Comedy Club Basement in New York, where they host "bringer shows." Comics are required to bring in paying customers in exchange for stage time. In other words, your comic ability is less important than your ability to fill a seat. The quality of these shows tends to vary, and a bad comic schlepping along thirty friends is given priority over an amazing comic who has no "plus one."

The booker for a bringer show can come off like a mobster. One former student told me about a booker trying to extort money when he turned up with fewer people than promised. Depending on where you live, these shows may be your only choice in the beginning.

What a bringer show has in common with every other show is it's all about filling seats. That's your value as a comic, and that doesn't change whether you are just starting or headlining clubs. So, start strategizing now on how to get stage time.

## **What's Your Commitment Level?**

My former student, Sherri Shepherd, moved to LA from Chicago committed to making a career in comedy. She took my stand-up comedy workshop to learn the basics and went on to do two or three open mics a night and was willing to drive an hour and a half to do five minutes at a restaurant, and then drive another hour for a three-minute set in a bar. Through her dedication, she got better, eventually appearing on Ellen DeGeneres's show more than twenty-three times, starring in sitcoms, and being a regular on the popular TV show, *The View*. At the pinnacle of her career, she was starring in her own sitcom.

## **Comedy Club Open Mics**

Most comedy clubs have open mic nights, but consider holding off on signing up for these at the major clubs until you and your material are polished, as no matter how good you are, you'll look green next to a pro. Bonus: very often these clubs offer classes and showcases for comedy students which means you get a video of your performance.

## **Open Mic in Bars**

Many bars have open mics during off hours to help drum up business. In exchange for stage time, all you typically have to do is buy a drink. You'll probably be performing for an audience of other comics at 1 p.m., so

you might want to have some material about the hardships of starting out to get the laughs going.

Former *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno started out performing anywhere he could, including a gig for patients in a mental hospital. He used to drive four hours each way from Boston to New York, hoping to get onstage at The Improv. Owner Budd Friedman, learning that Leno made the arduous trip at least once a week, was impressed and gave him a break. Tenacity and hard work are how Leno developed the talent and reputation that eventually led to his international success.

## Themed Shows

To fill empty chairs during off nights, many big city comedy clubs host one-night-a-week themed shows. These are talent nights for particular professions, including funny accountants, cab drivers, and teachers. Themed storytelling nights are scheduled at some venues, such as, “Heartbreaker Stories,” “Sex Talks,” or “Guilty Secrets.” Not all storytelling events are appropriate for stand-up comics, but once you start developing your *voice* and start doing open mics, you’ll be better positioned to determine which shows are right for you.

## Churches and Temples

Just look at a giraffe and you can tell God has a sense of humor. And where you pray may also be a place you can perform. Some religious

organizations host shows for their members and, as long as your material conforms to the sensibilities of a religious audience, you could get a gig and even get prayed. Sorry, “paid.”

## When You Have a Solid Twenty Minutes

Here are some venues to work when you have polished material.

### Booked Shows

Booked shows are arranged in advance and usually take place in comedy clubs, coffee shops, or the back room of bars. Though you’re not required to bring audience members, it often helps if you do. You’re also expected to promote the show to your fans via social media, direct emails, texting, etc. In return, you get to host and/or do an opening set. To get started, go to a few of these shows and sit where the host might notice you. Later, approach the host and ask about performing there. Bookers tend to put on people they know and trust, so *be polite to everyone*. Take advantage of this opportunity to introduce yourself to fellow comedians as well.

### Charity Organizations and Non-profits

Established comics are constantly hit up to appear at charity events. Sometimes comics get these gigs because they’re passionate about the charity—whether it’s for animal rights, cancer research, or other important causes. When the pros get tapped out, there may be room for you.

Comedian Noni Shaney volunteered to do a set for a non-profit organization for the homeless and got three paid charity events from it. The bookers in attendance liked how she tied her bits into the charity, as well as



how she ended her set reminding people how important the fundraiser was, instead of just ending with a joke.

## **Comedy Contests**

Ever dreamed of being Oregon's Funniest Person? Winning a contest like that can also open doors for you. Search Google for upcoming comedy festivals and contests near you.

Vicki Barbolak, another one of my workshop graduates, became a finalist on the TV show *America's Got Talent*. Before that, she won the title of "Funniest Mom in America" on TV's *Nick at Nite* and ended up playing Vegas with television producers developing shows for her.

## **You Have an Hour of Solid Material and Kill When Performing**

### **Four-Walling a Room**

Some venues rent out "four walls" (aka a room) for a set fee, or a "percentage of the door" (paid tickets), with a guarantee (a minimum you owe the club regardless of turnout). These can be comedy clubs, theaters, multi-purpose rooms, hotel conference rooms, or other venues. It's something you do *only* if you have a strong following, because guess what?

You're solely responsible for all the publicity and for filling the seats. If you don't, you're on the hook for any and all losses (\$\$\$).

## **Opening Act**

Once you have a solid hour of material, hitching yourself to a headliner's coattails is a great way to become a headliner yourself. And that's exactly how it happened for Dan Nainen, who went from novice to performing in front of audiences of thousands.

When Nainen came to one of my workshops, he was working as a middle manager at Intel, yet he yearned to be a comic. His act, which focused primarily on his Indian-Japanese heritage, caught the attention of Russell Peters, a Canadian stand-up who began performing in Toronto in 1989. By 2013, Peters, capitalizing on his Indian heritage, rose to number three on the *Forbes* list of the highest-paid comedians.

One night, on the way home from a performance, Nainen decided to stop by the New York Improv to see if he could catch a bit of Peters's performance. He arrived just as Peters had finished his set and overheard the organizers of the show lamenting the fact that the crowd wanted more, but no other comedians were around. Nainen offered to perform, and picking up on his self-confidence, the producers gave him a slot. Peters watched, was highly complimentary of Nainen's set, and then gave Nainen his phone number.

That bit of chutzpah secured Nainen as the opener for many of Peters's appearances, and since then, they've performed together in clubs and theaters around the world.

Watch headlining comics and get to know them. They were once just like you. And more important, you can be just like them.

## **Corporate Comedy**

Corporations often have comics perform for their big events: sales meetings, annual retreats, training and morale-boosting seminars, conferences, etc. Some Fortune 500 companies hire celebrity comics for fees of over \$100,000 per show, but more often, companies hold less elaborate events and need clean, apolitical comics. To get booked for these events, you usually need an agent. FYI: Doing corporate comedy is not to be confused with motivational speaking, which is covered in detail in my book, *The Message of You: Turn Your Life Story into a Money-Making Speaking Career*.

## **Creating Your Own Show**

Create opportunities for yourself by developing and pitching your own show. It takes a lot of sweat equity to get an audience, but having your own show means always having a place to work. Example: Some former students successfully pitched a Comedy Night to a hotel bar near an airport. As anyone can tell you, airport hotel bars have a built-in audience of stuck travelers who need a laugh. Obvious caveat: Producing a comedy show takes a lot of time and effort that could detract from your performing career.

*So...let's get you a gig!*

## **EXERCISE 5: Getting A Gig**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 5: Getting a Gig**

Google “Open Mics near me” to find local open mics in your area. Be sure to research if they are still running or not, as many of these listings are

not updated regularly (comedy club managers aren't known for their follow through!).

Copy the list of places into your “Exercise 5: Getting a Gig” document and follow the rules for securing stage time. For many open mics, you just show up. But, mark that date on your calendar—in ink!

***“All right, Judy, I did it. I got a gig. Now I’m freaking out.”***

You can totally do this. They may ask for five minutes, but if you’ve only got three, that’s OK. The good news is they’re generally happy if you go *under* your time. And at three minutes, figuring one joke every fifteen seconds, means you only need...*twelve jokes*.

Make sure you are following The Comedy Bible social media accounts so you can post your performance date and times!

You’ll also want to see where others are performing so you can support their shows. Remember: You’re not just building a career— you’re joining a community.

*Scared? Let me help you with that.*

# Five Tips to Conquer Stage Fright

Comics think differently. Where others see problems, we see punchlines. We have a warped, or as I like to say, counter-intuitive view of life. A dysfunctional family or a broken arm has an upside: potential material. So why not flip our fear to make it work for us?

## Turning Problems into Punchlines

(Walking onstage with my arm in a cast) “I’ve been in LA for years and look! I finally got cast in something!

—Judy Carter

For your consideration:

### **1. Fear’s a Great Motivator**

Being afraid of something forces you to prepare. Think about going on your first scuba dive. The possibility of dying underwater makes you double and triple check your equipment, and to go over every detail of your training. Apply this to stand-up. Use the threat of dying on stage for motivation so you’ll take extra time revising and punching up your material. Get in an extra session with your Comedy Buddy, too, or maybe book an extra session with a comedy coach.

## 2. Fear Gets You High

Your heart is racing, you have butterflies, your breathing quickens, and your body trembles with anticipation (Is this fear or sex?). Harness this feeling, mentally shift fear to excitement, and enjoy the adrenaline rush. Just like a scary roller-coaster ride, when it's over, you'll rush to do it again.

## 3. Lack of Confidence May Be a Plus

Here's something that might surprise you: the most confident comics are usually not the funniest. In my workshops, the comics who had *no* doubts about their material or ability to perform were often disconnected from themselves. Audiences tend to prefer comics who are authentic and willing to show their vulnerabilities and insecurities.

Worrying about how an audience will respond is normal, regardless of how experienced a comic is. We all relate to insecurities and respond to honesty, and so will your audience. Watch Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and notice how his insecurities work for him.

### Turning Fear into Material

Former student Susan Lynch posted on social media about turning fear into material. "I was freaked out making my comedy debut and told a colleague, 'I'm scared that, for seven minutes, a room full of people aren't going to like me.' My colleague said, 'That won't be a problem. A lot of people haven't liked you for way longer than seven minutes.' I went onstage and told the audience what she said and got a big laugh. It's now a killer opening line."

## 4. Fear Can Be Funny

Like everything else in your life, fear is material. Work it into your act. It's also a great connector, something all people can relate to. Use it as a way to pull your audience into your experiences.

*In this next exercise, let's turn your fears into savers.*

## EXERCISE 6: Stage Fright to Savers

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 6: Stage Fright Savers

*“What if I get onstage and go blank?”*

Some students worry about forgetting their act. Guess what? It's inevitable. Standing onstage looking terrified, the audience grows quiet. When the comic finally admits the truth, usually they get a laugh. “I forgot my act! I knew I shouldn't have stuck those pencils so far up my nose in kindergarten!” That usually becomes the highlight of their set because it's so authentic. Trust that if you drop the ball, you can pick it back up.

Write your top three fears related to performing in your “Exercises” folder under “Exercise 6: My Savers”:

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

Now, pick one and visualize it happening. Imagine turning that moment of terror into a genuine connection with the audience. Can't quite see that? Let me help you. You're going to write your recovery lines today.

It's good to have a phone charger in case your phone starts to die, right? Similarly, you'll feel more secure with a saver line in case you forget your material. It's fine to admit, "I forgot my act!" but you'll also want something to help you recover. Here are a few examples:

Former student, Carolyn Peletier says, "Crap! I forgot my act. Please pause while my brain reboots!"

**Warning:** The jokes in this book are examples. It would not be wise for you to steal them. Especially if any of the people in the club have read this book.

Now write three savers for when you forget your act in "Exercise 6: My Savers"

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

*Now, get ready for the most important part of creating material and gaining confidence. You need a team.*



# Finding Your Perfect Comedy Buddy

*“Judy, I’m funny in life, but not so funny if I just sit down and write.”*

Who told you to sit down and write? Comedy happens in life. And you’re probably funny in life because you have an audience to bounce that funny off of. The best way to get past fear, procrastination and creative anxiety is to lock arms with someone and work through this book together. For that, you need a Comedy Buddy.

## What Makes a Good Comedy Buddy?

- Someone you feel comfortable with.
- Someone you can say anything in front of.
- Someone who shows up.
- Someone who thinks you’re funny.
- Someone who doesn’t hit you up for money.

Very few comics create material alone. Being conversational about a topic and knocking around ideas often leads to great material that’s *organic*. The chemistry and energy of collaborating is an ideal foundation for what you want to happen with an audience.

“As you navigate through the rest of your life, be open to collaboration. Other people’s ideas are often better than your own. Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you, spend a lot of time with them, and it will change your life.

—Amy Poehler

Three things to keep in mind about the relationship with your Comedy Buddy:

1. **Be on the same wavelength.** To select a buddy, watch the person’s stand-up set or view his or her material online. This show of respect will encourage him or her to do the same for you. It’s not necessary to pick someone whose material is similar to yours. In fact, it may be more productive to buddy up with someone who covers entirely different territory. But there must be a mutual respect for the material each of you is creating, and some students from my workshops have sustained lifelong relationships with their first comedy buddies.
2. **Always have a buddy meeting date on your calendar.** This commitment is important to establish continuity and take the process seriously.
3. **Set time limits.** One person listens and takes notes while the other comic stands up to rant, rave, and be physical. Then you reverse roles. You both get the same amount of time.
4. **Go over the notes and do a punch-up.** After performing your revised bit, devote equal time to your buddy’s punched-up version. Give feedback and help each other improve some of the gems that came out of the initial work.

“Find a comic friend to call/meet and go over jokes/ premises/ideas. Play ‘Is This Funny?’ Be honest but gentle and don’t just wait until it is your turn. Tell them if you’ve heard similar bits. Two people is best. It’s one of the most fun and helpful exercises.”

—Gary Gulman

*Let’s find your Comedy Buddy.*

## **EXERCISE 7: Finding Your Comedy Buddy**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 7: My Comedy Buddy**

Go to the social media page at [TheComedyBible.com](https://TheComedyBible.com) and post a description of the kind of buddy you’d like to work with. Best to post not just what you’re looking for, but what you can contribute to someone else. You’ll find a match faster than a virgin on a dating app.

In your document “Exercise 7: My Comedy Buddy” enter:

1. A list of names, phone numbers, and email addresses of those who might make good comedy buddies
2. The results of your communication with each of them
3. The date(s) you’ll get together in person or on video chat with each person and the results of each meeting
4. Make sure you both have gigs on your calendars.

***BTW—You didn't get that gig, did you? "OMG Judy! How did you know?"***

Because you're a funny person, and funny people procrastinate. A commitment only has strength when it's verbalized—not to your cat, but to another human being. In this case, a human who is actually expecting you to show up, stand up, and be funny. And did you get a Comedy Buddy yet?

Do it. A buddy holds you accountable to weekly meetings, doing assignments, and keeping your eye on the prize. Your Comedy Buddy is not only your support system, but they'll also be the reason you'll get this work done.

The next part of this book focuses on creating something from nothing, which can be a daunting task.

A quick question: Did you write for at least ten minutes today? (The only acceptable answer is yes.) If not, stop and do it now. Don't break the chain.

*Now, don't move ahead before getting yourself a gig and a buddy!*

*When you have that gig on your calendar, let's go on to creating material.*

# PART 2



Stand-up Comedy  
Workshop:  
Thirteen Joke Writing  
Exercises

# Your Life Is a Joke: Finding Your Authentic Topics

The first step in writing new comedy material is finding your topics, then writing a lot about them. A topic by itself isn't funny—it's something that angers you or generates another strong emotion, or, at the very least, an opinion. Keep in mind, the more *serious* a topic is, the better chance you have of making it funny.

The best place to start your search for authentic topics is in your real life: your occupation, girlfriend/boyfriend, family, etc., and even your tragedies. You're not in a miserable job—you're spending eight hours a day being handed comedy material! You're not going through a horrible breakup—you're sobbing your way to a new ten-minute chunk of comedy gold. That's not a receding hairline—it's a punchline.

*Stand-up is the art of turning problems into punchlines. t*

"Comedians take all of the bad things about themselves and use them to make people laugh."

—Chris Rock

## Have the Courage to be Unfunny

One of the best pieces of advice on creating comedy material is to talk (or write) about things that are meaningful to you. This brings an

authenticity to your performance as well as making it easier to write and remember your material. You can't *make* people laugh. But you can go onstage and *communicate* how you genuinely feel about something.

“The best kind of comedy to me is when you make people laugh at things they’ve never laughed at, and also take a light into the darkened corners of people’s minds, exposing them to the light.”

—Bill Hicks

## Pick Unfunny Topics

It is the comic’s job to *find the funny* most people miss. If you pick topics because they’re already funny, such as sex, farting, or pooping, then you’re a hack. It takes a pro to find humor in things nobody thinks is funny.

For instance, what’s so funny about a brain tumor? Nothing... unless you’re Jim Gaffigan. Gaffigan opens his *Noble Ape* comedy special with material about how his wife, Jeannie, underwent surgery for, and recovered from, a brain tumor. Certainly *not* a funny topic. When asked why he used this material, he said:

“We all have tragedy we’ve dealt with in our lives. It’s familiar to people because we’ve all been in those moments of panic or sadness, so that stuff works pretty much anywhere.” Here’s a quote from his show:

*“It’s been hard, but the tumor is gone along with my ability to ever win another argument. It’s not like I was winning a lot before, but now I’m retired. And luckily my wife’s not the type to bring it up. Well, once she did. She was like, ‘You know, I did have brain surgery.’ And I couldn’t be like, ‘Yeah, that was like a month ago. It’s time to move on, you*

*know? What about my seasonal allergies? We all have our cross to bear.’”*

Divorce is usually a very painful life event, and Chris Rock devoted a chunk of his Netflix show, “Tambourine,” to it:

*“I’m going extra hard to compete with my ex to impress my kids. ‘I don’t know what you’re doing at your mother’s house but I’m gonna top that shit.’ Sometimes I bring guest stars home. I make sure the kids go back to her with a story. ‘Mama! Mama! Drake helped me with my homework! Lady Gaga made me a grilled cheese sandwich!’”*

Every one of my students, at first, feels scared to reveal truths about themselves. They’d rather do hack jokes about genitals than reveal what’s really going on in their lives. Your truth doesn’t have to be tragic, but if you’re nervous about revealing it, it’s probably a good topic for your act. Truth can be hilarious, *and* it can touch your audience in a meaningful and memorable way.

## **Avoid Hack Comedy Topics**

Hack topics can be anything that is inauthentic, overdone, and unoriginal. It includes, but is not limited to: airline food, traffic, toilets, Viagra, peeing, pooping, farting, or anything coming out of a hole in liquid, solid, or gas form. After all, your audience will probably be eating nachos. Make them laugh—not throw up.

Dated and old material that’s no longer relevant is also hack, such as jokes about former presidents, celebrities from last century, and the difference between cats and dogs.



As comic Gary Gulman says, “When I started (in stand-up) there were probably fifty New England comics doing the ‘gay voice’ and another twenty-five doing ‘Indian voices.’ If you don’t want to stop doing these voices because they’re bigoted, stop because it makes you a hack!”

Don’t do what others are doing. Do *you*.

*To find the funny, we need a willingness to reveal the not-so-perfect parts of ourselves. Let’s find your authentic topics.*

## EXERCISE 8: Finding Your Authentic Topics

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 8: My Topics

***“Trust me, Judy, my life is B-O-R-I-N-G!”***

Hey, there’s funny in *boring*. Having a college major in art history doesn’t seem like a laugh-a-minute topic. But Australian comic and former student of mine, Hannah Gadsby, does a twenty-minute routine on art history for her Netflix special that is not only hilarious, but won an Emmy for Best Writing for a Variety Show.

*“Art history taught me, historically, women didn’t have time for the think-thoughts. They were too busy napping, naked, alone, in the forest. Even biologically...I don’t feel like I’m the same species. For a*

*start, I've got a functioning skeletal system. If you go into the galleries, you see, if a woman's not sporting a corset and/or a hymen...she just loses all structure. Just sort of like...just flopping about all over the place, going, "Oh, what is furniture?" Sidesaddle, tits akimbo. No wonder we can't reverse park, ladies! Dumb history women couldn't even reverse park their arse onto a chair!"*

The next few exercises are intense. Hang in there and follow the directions to:

- Investigate your life and come up with a list of *topics*.
- Whittle them down to *three main topics*.
- Dive deep into those three main topics.

Do this exercise with your Comedy Buddy. Take your time and be thorough because it can generate the basis of your material for years to come. Again, this is your starting point. Unlike a three-legged horse, you won't be funny out of the gate. You'll build to that later. Any professional comic will tell you, when you go for "the funny," you lose the truth.

Do this exercise in The Comedy Bible Workbook.  
Download it at **TheComedyBible.com**.

## **1. Finding Your Authentic Topics: Your job or profession**

Statistically, 95 percent of new comics think their occupation is boring and don't want to base their stand-up act on it. Nonetheless, looking at your job with a comedy slant will uncover tons of material. Remember, your topic is *not* supposed to be funny, initially. And let's face it, if you really hate your job, that's a great reason to joke about it.

It's OK if you have absolutely no idea on how to make a topic funny at the start. Trust the process. For example:

“I was a high school English teacher, but had to move on. I couldn't handle the money and prestige.

**—Monica Piper**

“I'm a Lyft driver. It's weird that passengers feel the need to make small talk. The first thing they ask when they get in my car is, 'How long have you been doing this?' What they really want to know is, 'When exactly did your life fall apart?'

**—Nate Banditelli**

Comedy is not about picking funny topics; rather, it's about making ordinary topics funny.

**In your “Exercise 8: My Topics” document, list all the jobs you've had.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## **2. Finding Your Authentic Topics: What stage of life are you in now?**

Life is a series of different stages, and jokes based on events in those stages connect you to the audience. Consider these life stages:

- Hitting puberty
- High school
- Living with your parents
- Going to college
- Your twenties
- Having roommates
- Job interviewing
- Stuck in an unsatisfying job
- Buying your first house
- Parenting—babies, toddlers, tweens, teens
- Entering middle age
- Taking care of elderly parents
- Retiring
- Empty nest
- Considering a move into a retirement community

“The most important thing about learning comedy is to start from who you are. If you begin the process by imitating what you perceive to be a comedy rhythm, you will get laughs sooner, but you will not be unique.”

—Rita Rudner

“ (Going to college) College is great. It’s the only time in life where you can write a check for thirty-nine cents...and bounce it.

—Henry Cho

“ (Being in your twenties) We kids who hate our parents really just have unrealistic standards. We think parents are these ‘superior beings,’ and they’re not. They’re just people, who suck, like the rest of us. That’s how we should introduce them, like, ‘These are my people, Rhonda and Tim, they do what they can.’

—Taylor Tomlinson

“ (Entering Middle Age) I used to walk around with a condom in my pocket, now I walk around with a little booklet listing which fish has the highest mercury content. You want to seal the deal? Whip out that little booklet at a dinner, ‘Look at this, we can get the flounder. Who else can tell you to get flounder? Do I take care of you or what?’

—Larry David

“ (Living with Parents) I’m at the breakfast table this morning and I read in the newspaper that more and more adults are living at home with their

parents. That surprised me...I was like, 'Mom, did you read this?'

**—Brian Regan**

**Write in your “Exercise 8: My Topics” document the stages that apply to you now:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

### **3. Finding Your Authentic Topics: What's your relationship status?**

- Single
- Dating
- Just moved in together
- Married
- Divorced/divorcing
- Dating after divorce
- Second, third, fourth marriage
- Getting back together with an ex
- In an open relationship
- It's complicated

“(Married) My wife won’t tell me when she’s mad. I have to guess. I knew she was mad at me last time because she made me a sandwich with the last two pieces of bread... Well, it wasn’t even the last two pieces. She had to dig inside the bag, reach to the very bottom of the bag, and grab the other end piece. I didn’t notice at first because she made the sandwich inside out.

—Mike E Winfield

“(Dating) I told my wife I wanted an open marriage. She said, ‘Great! I think the front door’s open.’

—Alan Roberts

Audiences love the topic of relationships. Even if five of my students have the same topic of “Single,” they all come up with different material. Remember: This is your *starting point* for connecting with the audience. I’ll say it again, it’s *not* your topic that’s funny, but rather what you *do* with it.

“(Being Single) Reality doesn’t hit you about how bad the single life is until you call your friends to go out... none of your friends are available because they’re out with their women. ‘Yo, what up boy? Whatcha trying to do tonight?’ ‘Oh, man, I ain’t doing nothing. It’s cupcake Tuesdays. Me and my lady, we make cupcakes. Red velvet. I get to lick the bowl and everything.’ ‘Lick the

bowl? Man, get off my phone.’ ‘Hey! don’t be mad at me ‘cause you ain’t got no bowl to lick.’

—Kevin Hart

“ (Being single is hard...) It’s like looking for a job. Because when you’re first looking for a job, you’re real picky. Then you start breaking down. You ask your friends if they know anybody hiring. Then you’ll take a part-time job doing anything. You just want something with benefits.

—Matin

**Write in your “Exercise 8: My Topics” document on how you characterize your relationship status.**

**4. Finding Your Authentic Topics: Are you a member of a minority group because of your ethnicity/sexual orientation/religion/disability?**

If you belong to a minority group, you can get a lot of comedy mileage from joking about “stupid stereotypes.” The one caveat is that you *must qualify* to joke about this topic, otherwise you could get pegged as a racist, homophobe, anti-Semite, or worst of all, unfunny.

“ (It’s weird being mixed-race because...) it looks like a ghost and a shadow made love and I was the result. Our Sears family photo was always a little tricky for us. The first few takes, my father would come out just eyes and teeth. Then they’d



adjust the lighting and he'd be beautifully lit, but my mom looked like an apparition.

—Aisha Alfa

“Accept who you are. Unless you are a serial killer.”

—Ellen DeGeneres

Former student Maz Jobrani didn't want to talk about his Arabic heritage onstage because at the time, there was a lot of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. I strongly encouraged him to use it as a topic and include personal jokes about his Iranian family. As soon as he did, paid gigs came flowing his way, and he's one of very few touring Middle Eastern comics. He went on to produce and star in *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, which later became a film, and he got a book deal with Simon & Schuster. Jobrani has appeared in many films and TV shows, and starred in a Netflix special filmed at The Kennedy Center.

“(Being Middle Eastern) A lot of times in Hollywood, when casting directors find out you're of Middle Eastern descent, they go, ‘Oh, you're Iranian? Great. Can you say, ‘I will kill you in the name of Allah?’ I could say that, but what if I were to say, ‘Hello, I'm your doctor.’”

—Maz Jobrani

On *America's Got Talent*, Samuel J. Comroe joked about having Tourette's syndrome:

(Having a disability) *“It’s weird how people want to bully a disabled guy with Tourette’s, because there’s no winning for them. This dude wanted to fight me. I said, ‘Bring it! I’m not scared! I was bullied when I was younger, so you’re not gonna bully me as an adult. And if you fight me, you’re at a disadvantage. Because if you beat me up, you’re a dude that beats up a dude with a disability. And if I beat you up, you just got your ass kicked by a dude with a disability.’”*

Your topic might be something the audience notices as soon as you walk out onstage. Former student Hannah Gadsby comes out onstage looking, in her own words, very butch. She opens by joking about her identity: *“I don’t identify as transgender. But I’m clearly gender not-normal. I don’t think even ‘lesbian’ is the right identity for me. I really don’t. I identify as ‘tired.’ I’m just really tired.”*

“(Being an immigrant) The police pulled me over and asked me if I have anything illegal in my car. I looked at my cousin and I ran.

**—Felipe Esparza**

**Write a list of any minority or misunderstood group(s) you belong to in your “Exercise 8: My Topics” folder.**


1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## **5. Finding Your Authentic Topics: What was your upbringing like?**

What was it like growing up? Were you raised in a cult, or in an ultra-religious environment? Do you have twelve brothers and sisters, or two dads and a bisexual mom? Very few of us had a “normal” upbringing, so your unique circumstances will connect you with those who also had unusual childhoods.

Former student Kaitlin Colombo, who was just a teenager when she took my class, had a gay dad and a lesbian mom as parents, and built a whole act on it. Soon she had a development deal at FOX, and also appeared on *Last Comic Standing*, E! Entertainment, and MTV.

(Having a gay parent) *“It’s weird that my friends are jealous my dad is gay. ‘Gee, Kaitlin, I wish my dad was gay.’ ‘Yeah, my dad wishes your dad was gay, too.’”*

 (Siblings) Having a twin brother is strange because you grow up with people asking you: ‘Hey is it true that you’re connected? Like when he cries, you cry, and you feel the same thing?’ No! Imagine if that were true. Imagine if I could feel every time my brother masturbated. Like if I’m doing a show and all of a sudden...\*groan\* ‘Oh...OH...’

**—Sofia Nino de Rivera**

**Write in your “Exercise 8: My Topics” document five things that were unusual about your upbringing:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## 6. Finding Your Authentic Topics: In what ways are you a “fish out of water?”

Were you were raised Muslim in West Virginia? Did you grow up African-American in a Jewish neighborhood? Are you the only liberal in your family? Are you the only person fluent in English in your family? Are you a woman working in a male-dominated field?



Being a fish out of water is tough, but that's how you evolve.

—Kumail Nanjiani

For example, comic Henry Cho jokes about his childhood experiences as an Asian-American growing up in the South. *“I’m an Asian with a Southern accent. To a lot of people, that right there is funny.”*

Comic Gary Gulman is Jewish and went to a Catholic college. He jokes: *“I went to Boston College. It’s a Catholic college, and yeah, I had a nickname there: ‘Jew.’”*

**Write in your “Exercise 8: My Topics” document the ways in which you are a “Fish out of water”:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## 7. Your Heritage

A large part of your identity is linked to your religion, ethnicity, culture and family history. Example:

“It’s hard being Italian because we have a lot of stupid myths and beliefs that don’t make any sense. In my house, no one will kill a moth because they say it’s one of your dead relatives. If you die and come back as a moth, you should probably die again. Every time I come home there’s five moths flying around the light outside my house. The only people I know in my life that died are my aunt and my grandma, who are these other three jerks?”

**—Thomas Dale**

Paula Poundstone jokes about being an atheist:

(Religion) *“Weird thing about being an atheist is we don’t have a mandate to convert anybody. You’re not gonna wake up on a Saturday morning and see me at the door like, ‘Hey, I brought this blank book for you to look at.’”*

Here, comic Paul Elia jokes about how hard it is being from a background nobody knows.

*“Chaldean is my ethnicity—we’re Catholic Middle Eastern people from Iraq. Not a lot of people know what that is. It gets frustrating when I text ‘Chaldean’ to my friends and the iPhone auto-corrects it to*

*‘Calzone.’ The iPhone is like, ‘You must mean pizza’...Nope—just my race.”*

**Write in your “Exercise 8: My Topics” document your religion, ethnicity, and/or your nationality:**

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

*You now have a list of unfunny topics to turn funny. But first, let’s refine your list.*

## **EXERCISE 9: Picking Your Best Three Topics**

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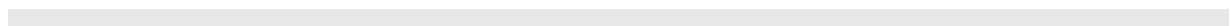
### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 9: My Best Three Topics**

*“OK, I have a lot of topics, but none of them are funny. How do I pick the right topics?”*

By now you should have a list of thirty potential topics. Let’s narrow them down to your best three. The first step is discovering how you feel about these topics, then focusing on the ones that stir the most *passion* and/or *anger*.

### **Ranting and Raving to Get Laughs**

*Get up on your feet* now and do some *improv* standing in front of your Comedy Buddy. I’m going to show you how to dive into each topic on your list with attitude, and see where it leads.



## Rant and Rave

“The first person I learned comedy from said that I should talk about things I am passionate about—that I love or hate—because the audience likes to see passion. The stuff I rant and rave about stems from a place that really pisses me off.”

—Lisa Lampanelli

Use the following directions to rant and rave on *all* your topics.

Say “(*topic*) is (*Pick one*: hard, weird, scary, stupid) *because...*” then rant about *why* your topic is either hard, weird, scary, or stupid.

For example:

“Waiting Tables” is your topic.

You might start off with “Waiting tables is hard!” (Really get into the attitude! You must be on your feet, and get physical, letting your emotions come out.)

HWSS: Hard, Weird, Scary, Stupid—this will be mentioned throughout the book. Until you’re getting paid, don’t change these words. They work.

You might come up with, “Waiting tables is hard because you depend on tips, and no matter how great you are, some people don’t tip!”

And now...your topic might morph into, “It’s hard being nice to people who don’t tip...”

And then that triggers your anger about how hard it is to be nice to customers who don’t tip because they say such stupid things. And that goes

into, “Waiting tables is hard because customers have real attitude...” And you end up with a joke like this:

*“(Waiting tables is hard because...) sometimes people come in with a real attitude. This couple comes in and they’re like, ‘Can we be in and out of here in thirty minutes?’ I’m like, ‘Hell, you can leave right now’.”* Dusty Slay

So, you’re throwing emotion on a *topic* and saying the word *because* and explaining *why* this *topic* is hard, weird, scary, or stupid.

***“What if I can’t think of anything to say?”***

If you can’t think of anything to say, try ranting about your topic with a different attitude word. For example, if there’s nothing *hard* about your topic, find *stupid* things about your topic.

“For me, comedy starts as a spew, a kind of explosion, and then you sculpt it from there, if at all. It comes out of a deeper, darker side. Maybe it comes from anger, because I’m outraged by cruel absurdities, the hypocrisy that exists everywhere, even within yourself, where it’s hardest to see.”

—Robin Williams

## **Tips on Ranting and Raving About Topics**

1. **Don’t go into stories.** For example, “It’s hard being a waitress because I was working at a small diner and this guy comes in with no shirt on, and...”



This is the most common mistake beginners (and even experienced comics) make when writing stand-up material. It doesn't make sense that being a waitress is hard "because you were working at a small diner..." Make sure you link the attitude to answer *why* your topic is hard, weird, scary, or stupid. Later in this book you will learn that this becomes the *premise* of the joke.

2. **Hold the *specific attitude*** throughout the entire rant. Emphasize each word with the emotion of your topic—it's hard, weird, scary, or stupid.
3. **Don't *try* to be funny.** Instead, be logical and truthful about how you *feel* about the topic. If something funny happens in your rant, write it down and keep going.

A sure way to ***not*** have an audience laugh is to have a joke not make sense. A perplexed audience is not a laughing audience.

4. **If certain topics have you drawing a blank, *skip them*.**

When finished ranting with your Comedy Buddy on all of your topics, write down your best three topics in your "Exercise 9: My Best Three Topics" document. These would be the topics that you had the most passion about and could rant about them forever. Don't worry if they are *not* funny.

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

Hey! Look through your Morning Writings and see if you have already started writing about the topics you've picked. Maybe there's a joke in there already. Create subfolders under your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder with these three topics as well as topics you are most passionate about.

## Mind-mapping Your Best Three Topics

Now you've got three topics you feel strongly about. Wouldn't it be great if the process ended here, and you could just tell stories about your topics? Uh-uh, no way, we're only at the *beginning*. The next step is to *expand* your best three topics into more details, getting into the DNA of those topics.

For a master class on how this works, watch Jim Gaffigan's brilliant one-hour Netflix special *Noble Ape* based on a very unfunny topic I've mentioned earlier—his wife's brain tumor. So, on the main topic of "wife's brain tumor" he has five *subtopics* he joked about:

- Hospitals
- Doctor's specialties
- Doctor's prognosis
- Stupid things people say
- Dealing with family

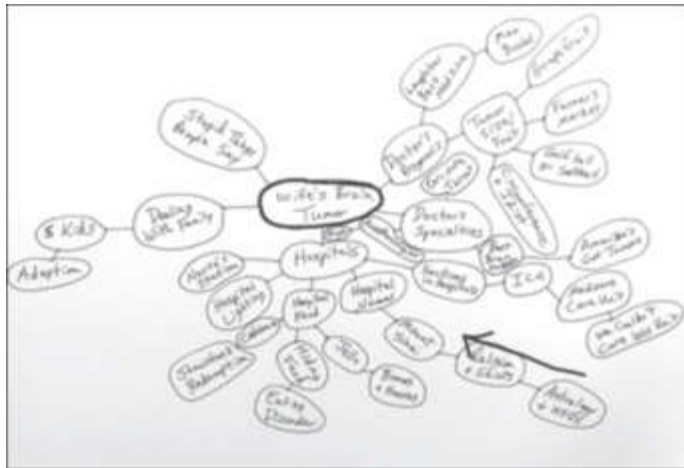
These all turned into killer material. For instance, on the topic of the doctor's prognosis:

"The surgeon told me the tumor was the size of a pear...which is scary because I was like, 'Did he go to med school or a farmer's market?'"

Gaffigan truly got into the details of these topics as he created *microtopics*. For instance, the subtopic of hospitals turned into even smaller details (microtopics):

- Notice how one...ahem, benign topic can expand into a variety of related subtopics.

So, if Gaffigan did a mind-map of his topics/subtopics/microtopics, it might look like this:



Notice the topics themselves aren't funny—it's what he does with them that makes people laugh. For instance, going off the microtopic of hospital names, Gaffigan throws on the attitude *weird* and adding an act-out, gets great material.

“My wife had the surgery in New York City at a hospital named Mount Sinai. (It’s weird...) that a lot of hospitals in the US are either named after saints or ancient places in Israel, which is not that reassuring when you think about it. It’s like, (act-out) ‘Hi, welcome to our hospital. We’re all about science which is why our building is named after the place God talked to Moses as a burning bush. Over here’s our Casper the Ghost Wing...next to our Astrology Center. Do you like UFOs? We love those. We’re all about science.’”

Do yourself a favor and watch Gaffigan’s one-hour comedy special, “Noble Ape,” and see how all the topics in this mind-map pay off in huge laughs.

Depending on what your topics are, you can use them to niche market yourself and get gigs. For instance, as a former teacher, I’ve performed at many educator events using material which draws on my experience. Comic Frank King performs material on depression and anxiety, and markets himself as “The Mental Health Comic.”

*Now, let’s mind-map your best three topics.*

## **EXERCISE 10: MIND-MAPPING YOUR BEST THREE TOPICS**

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 10:  
Expanding My Best Topics**

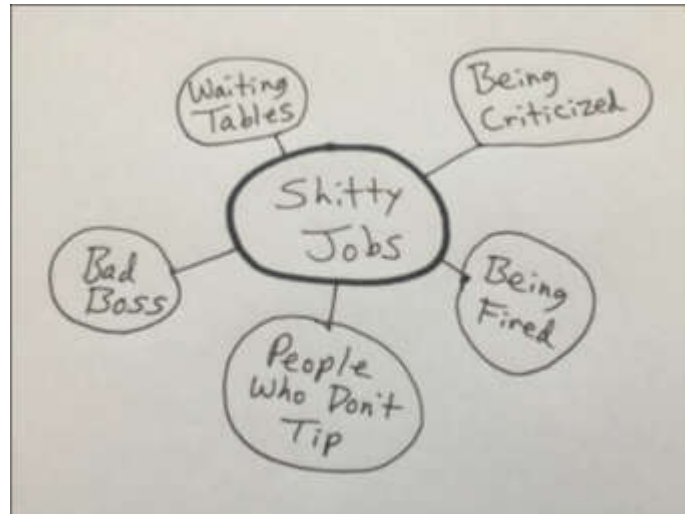
***“Okay, I have some good topics that get me heated up. Now what?”***

Let’s expand your topics and find subtopics. In your Comedy Bible Workbook, put each of your “Best Three Topics” at the *top* of a page. Then under each one list five subtopics. This would be topics that are hard, weird, scary, or stupid about your main topic.

For instance:

<b>Shitty Jobs</b>	<b>Being Single/Dating</b>	<b>Living with A Roommate</b>
Waiting tables	Online dating	Dealing with mental illness
Bad boss	Not getting to second dates	Sharing your stuff
Being criticized	Sex on dates	Money issues
Being fired	Meeting parents	No privacy to have sex
People who don't tip	Reading a review of date on social (two your thumbs down)	Roommate flirts with dates

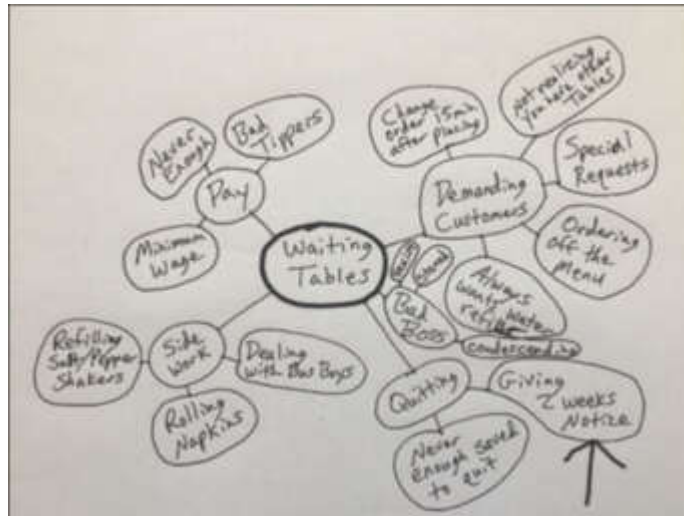
Now, let’s turn your topics and subtopics into a *mind-map*. If writing in The Comedy Bible Workbook, simply fill in the balloons in this section. If writing in your self-made workbook, it’s best to work freehand and put the main topic in the middle of the page, draw a circle around it, and draw lines out from that circle to at least *five things* that are directly related to that topic. Then, repeat this for your other two best topics, each on its own page. So, one topic might look like this:



You've just mind-mapped your main topics and five related subtopics for each. Now, you have twenty-five topics to work with. Now, let's add *microtopics*.

Find five micro topics of each of your five subtopics. Microtopics are where you drill into more details. This is where you CSI your subtopics and get to the minutia.

For instance, you might start with your main topic "Shitty Jobs." And an offshoot of that is "Waiting Tables." Then when you create a mind-map with "Waiting Tables" in the middle of it, a subtopic is "Quitting" and microtopic detail of that is "Giving Two-Week Notice." Take a moment to look at this mind-map.



Then when you throw attitude and an act-out on it, you could come up with a joke such as Dusty Slay’s joke about giving two-week notice:

*“I put in my two-week notice, not because I’m a good employee, but because that’s my favorite two weeks of any job I’ve ever had. (It’s weird that...) it’s worth it to get the job just to put the two-week notice in. It’s like a little vacation right there at the end. Because then I get to say my favorite phrase at work, ‘I don’t care, I’m about to quit.’ A lot of power in those words. Your boss is like, ‘Hey, you were late today.’ ‘Hey, you know I’m about to quit, right?’”*

Slay then gets many more laughs off the topic “Two-Weeks’ Notice.” Watch his set at [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com).

Write freehand and create your mind-map quickly, writing without judging. Make your mind-map similar to Jim Gaffigan’s mind-map in the previous chapter.

**Warning:** At this point, many students lose faith in their original topics and start changing them, thinking they’re supposed to be funny. **Don’t!** They sabotaged

their creative process and ended up with ***nothing*** for the showcase. Those who trusted this process developed kick-ass acts.

## Turning Your Topics into Comedy Material

*“Judy, I’ve got spectacularly unfunny topics. How do I make them funny?”*

In the next exercise, you’ll rant and rave to come up with funny stuff. Don’t censor yourself. If swearing and cursing helps you break down creative barriers, then go for it. At the beginning stages of creating material you need to free yourself from all restraints! Don’t worry what your mother might think if she sees your act. And most importantly, give yourself permission to suck. The idea that jokes come out of your mouth fully-formed is an expectation guaranteed to ruin your creativity. Tell your inner critic, “Go f\*\*k yourself.”

OK, congrats! You’ve got a lot of authentic topics. The more topics you have, the better your chances of scoring laughs. Now let’s go on another rant!

## EXERCISE 11: Ranting and Raving to Laughs

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 11: My Rants to Laughs**

**Comedy Buddy Exercise**



Time to rant and rave with your Comedy Buddy on *all* your topics—sub and micro.

***“But Judy, didn’t we already do this?”***

Yes, but this time you’re not doing it to find your topics, but rather to *find the funny*. You won’t get material sitting around *trying* to write clever things. You must exit the logical part of your brain and access your gut—*launching your creativity*. Once again, you’ll rant and rave in front of your Comedy Buddy by talking about each topic with a specific attitude.

The attitude words are: *hard, weird, scary, and stupid*.

So, let’s say one of your authentic topics is how *hard* it is being an *African-American*. And filling out your mind-map, *drugs* come up as a subtopic. So, when ranting, perhaps your attitude shifts from *hard* to *stupid* and your topic shifts to *stupid stereotypes that all African-Americans take drugs*. Next thing, you go... “That’s *stupid because...*” And you end up with Wanda Sykes’s brilliant joke:

*“...Black people, we don’t even get our hands on opioids. They don’t even give ‘em to us. White people get opioids like they’re Tic Tacs. It amazes me how many opioids you motherf\*\*kers have. I’m sitting in a writer’s room with a bunch of white people, right? And I’m like, ‘Damn, I got a headache.’ White people start pulling out all kind of pills and shit. Just f\*\*king loose pills in Ziploc bags. ‘Would you like an oxycodone? I got oxycodone.’ ‘No, she should take a Percocet. Give her a Percocet.’ Another girl’s over there preparing a needle. ‘Give me your arm.’”*

Notice that in Wanda Sykes’s joke she ends up *acting out* a scene that takes place in “a writer’s room with a bunch of white people.” This is called an *act-out* and if you can rant and rave yourself to acting out a scene, that’s great. Later, we will go into detail about act-outs.

Follow these steps:

1. Practice speaking with attitude. First, say those four attitude words *out loud*, feeling the different attitudes in your *body*. Exaggerate the emotion of each word: *hard*, *weird*, *scary*, *stupid*.
2. Talk about your day in front of your Comedy Buddy, infusing every word with one specific attitude—hard, weird, scary, or stupid. Have your Comedy Buddy guess which attitude you’re expressing.
3. Give your buddy your main topic, subtopic, and microtopic outline. With your buddy sitting and you standing, have him or her pick one of your topics randomly, then set a timer and *rant for one minute* on it by saying...
  - Topic is hard, because...
  - Topic is weird, because...
  - Topic is scary, because...
  - Topic is stupid, because...

You can also do this by asking, “*You know what’s weird about (insert your topic)?*”

*Get worked up!* Pace, shout, and move your hands around, getting into the *emotion* to see where it takes you.

Example: Divorce (topic) is hard (attitude) because *it’s hard to date after you’re newly single*. It might be helpful for your Comedy Buddy to ask, “*What do you mean?*”

Continuing the example: “*It’s hard to believe another person will love you after someone calls you a frickin’ unlovable loser.*”

And another reason why divorce is *hard*...

Then switch to another attitude.

Divorce is *scary* because...

Divorce (topic) is scary (attitude) because *you look at all potential mates as the wreckage of your future. On a first date you're going, "Can I write you a check for half my worth right now?"*

4. Push the topics further than you ever thought you could. Go beyond the expected. That's what makes people laugh—the unexpected. And if the topic switches to something else, let it. For example:

Dating after a divorce (topic) is hard (attitude) because *I'm so broke I can only afford to pay my car payment or gas. But not both.*

So, the topic goes into *being broke*. Let it flow.

Stuck? If you find yourself getting stuck, then just keep repeating the attitude word, "It's *hard*, boy is it *hard*..." until something occurs to you to send that home. Keep the attitude going; exaggerate it if you have to.

5. Repeat, using another attitude word. Then have your Comedy Buddy shout out a different attitude word and repeat.

Creative freedom is gained when you stop trying to be funny and focus on communicating why a topic pisses you off.

During the ranting and raving, write down, or have your buddy record, anything that might have *comedy possibility* in the “Jokes in Progress by Topic” section of your workbook.

What’s a comedy possibility? It’s something very real and very truthful. “It’s funny because it’s true.” When spoken out loud, your buddy relates and cracks up. And that means the audience will, too.

Comedy material cannot be emotionally neutral. Your subject matter has to disgust you, pain you, or thrill you, because audiences don’t respond to words, they respond to feelings.

A joke works if you can 100 percent emotionally believe it. And that’s why we’re focusing on *attitude*.

### ***“Judy, what about cursing?”***

Open mics are full of dropped F-bombs and genitals being discussed in detail. And that’s just the church gigs. For many beginning comics, doing stand-up is an excuse to get nasty, sexual, and crude. There’s nothing wrong with using so-called blue material. Censorship of any kind has no place in the clubs. No doubt about it, some premises just need strong words, such as, “F\*\*k racism!”

However, when a comic uses shock words in lieu of having well-written material it’s a sure sign of an amateur. Many wannabe comics actually believe stand-up is just getting on stage and cursing. You can see those comics, week after week at *non-paying* gigs because, if you need to drop F-bombs to get a laugh, you’re not working hard enough on your material. On the other hand, sometimes I like to swear up a storm while creating material and then remove the F-bombs in a rewrite.

## More Paying Gigs If You Work Clean

Once after a corporate event, the meeting planner asked me to recommend someone else. So, I turned into a booking agent, reviewing comics' YouTube videos and submitting my recommendations. What an eye-opener. The meeting planner was looking for female comics, and was paying big bucks. In the videos I watched, about a third of the ladies opened with a sexual joke, which put them out of the running for the gig. Moral: Try working clean. At an open mic, you might not get big laughs, but you'll have a better chance of making big bucks.

After ranting and raving on all your topics, you should have ten-to-thirty fledgling jokes. Don't worry if they aren't knee-slapping, fall-off-your-chair funny. They're not yet fully-formed, so don't kill any of them off prematurely. Let's keep what you have and see what develops.

As your rants turn into jokes, copy them from **Comedy Bible Workbook >Exercises > Exercise 11: Ranting and Raving to Laughs to Comedy Bible Workbook >Jokes in Progress by Topic** and have a folder for each of your topics. As you keep working on these jokes, you'll then transfer them to your "My Act" folder.

*Next, let's make your material funnier by adding act-outs.*

# Payoffs: The Act-Out

*“Judy, I seem to be funny in life, but I suck at writing punchlines.”*

Well, guess what? Jokes ending with punchlines are pretty much dead unless you're playing to a retirement home, and even then, your comedy may be considered too old school. *Act-outs* are the way to make people laugh hard. It's the perfect combination of stand-up and improv. Richard Pryor was one of the first comics to fully step into his material as an actor entering a scene. Whoever or whatever Pryor mentioned, he acted it out. Here's a classic Pryor joke about the difference between white and black funerals.

*“(It's weird...) Black funerals are different than white funerals, right. You know, white people have funerals. They're weird because, you don't give it up at the funeral. You do love your dearly departed as much as we do, but at the funeral you don't really show it (act-out of someone softly crying). And then sometimes they faint (act-out of someone sighing). And see, black people let it hang out at the funeral. They don't care, they're (act-out of screaming)! Lord have mercy, Jesus, help me, Lord...And then they jump right on the coffin. Take me God, take me, take me, take me!”*

Robin Williams adjusted comedy to the cocaine-paced '80s with extremely short setups, and wild act-outs. Can you identify all the act-outs in this joke?

*“It's weird that baseball players have to go in front of a grand jury and say, ‘Yeah, I did cocaine. Can you blame me? It's a slow goddamn*

*game! Come on Jack! Standing out in left field for seven innings, and there's a long white line going down to home plate! I see the guy putting it out going, 'Heh heh heh heh!' And that damn organ music too, the whole (does intro to 'Charge!')! Third base coach is always doing this... (wiping nose, fidgeting around). When he's doing that, I don't know whether to slide or do a line! People sliding into home plate headfirst, umpire goes, 'You're out!' 'No, baby, I'm up now! Ha ha ha!'"*

Here's another Williams joke that depends on act-outs:

*"(It's weird how...) beer commercials usually show big men, manly men, doing manly things: (act-out) 'You've just killed a small animal. It's time for a light beer.' Why not have a realistic beer commercial, with a realistic thing about beer, where someone goes, (act-out mix) 'It's five o'clock in the morning. You've just pissed on a dumpster. It's Miller time.'"*

***"So, what exactly is an act-out?"***

An act-out is when you're no longer talking to the audience, but you're in a scene, talking to an imaginary character. In the setup, you talk to the audience, but in the act-out the audience isn't there, and you become a character, or characters.

Let's work on the mechanics of act-outs where every person you mention in your setup is acted out.

In this 'Williams' joke, he names his topic: beer commercials.

Attitude is "weird."

The setup is said to the audience:

*"(It's weird that...) beer commercials usually show big men, manly men, doing manly things..."*

Next, when Williams does the act-out, he's no longer talking to the audience, but has jumped into a scene—a commercial.

Act-out: *'You've just killed a small animal. It's time for a light beer.'*

Now, he's back talking to the audience:

*"Why not have a realistic beer commercial, with a realistic thing about beer, where someone goes..."*

Here Williams does an act-out of a "realistic" beer commercial:

*"It's five o'clock in the morning. You've just pissed on a dumpster. It's Miller Time!"*

***"But Judy, I'm more of a deadpan comic and not very good at acting."***

Some beginning comics get uptight when it comes to doing act-outs. Not everyone feels they can capture the mannerisms and vocal essence of the different characters they mention in their acts. Here's the thing: the audience doesn't know what your Aunt Anna sounds like, so any slight variation from your own voice will be fine. The Comedy Truth Patrol won't stand up and say, *"Put down that joke. Your aunt doesn't sound like that!"* See what I did there? That's an act-out of a Comedy Truth Patrol. Get it?

Act-outs rely on your physicality and attitude, and less on your ability to do spot-on impersonations of real people. That's one reason you were on your feet and emoting in the last exercise. You'll develop and hone your act-out skills throughout this section.

## **Insider tips for successful act-outs:**

**Characters with accents get laughs.** My Grandma Leah had a very heavy Russian accent and she was markedly Jewish. I have a joke where



I'm trying to explain to her what a sperm bank is. I do an act-out of her asking, "How can you trust a place where everything is frozen and nothing's fresh? Oy, Judy! You crazy girl!"

**Guys, don't act-out women by doing a high-pitch falsetto.** It comes off as demeaning. To act out another gender, just *slightly* raise your voice. Women, slightly lower your voice when acting out a man.

**Act-outs always include words**, even when acting out animals or inanimate objects. Example:

*"It's scary how codependent my dog is. I go out to get the mail and she's like (act-out) 'Where have you been?! I missed you so much! I love you. I love you. I missed you!'* And my cat, on the other hand, is completely emotionally unavailable. I'm like (act-out) '*Come on, get up on the bed, get up on the bed.'* And my cat's like (pretends to be smoking a cigarette. Act-out) '*Get a life!*'"

By the way, there is nothing funnier than acting out an animal with an accent and attitude. A New York City dog is a lot funnier than a dog from Idaho.

**A surefire way to get a laugh is acting out inanimate objects.** Look around your current surroundings. Maybe there's a chair. So, act out that chair. Robin Williams would say, "*I wonder if chairs think, (act-out) 'Oh no, here comes another asshole.'*"

Act out anything, as it doesn't have to be a joke. If you commit to it, you'll get that laugh.

Act-outs are more effective in *present tense*. Rather than, "This girl *said* to me..." say, "This girl *says* to me..." and then act out the scene as if she's speaking directly to you.

Check out the act-outs in Michelle Wolf's joke:

*“The environment is in terrible shape, and it’s weird because most people pretend that they care about it. I don’t believe anyone actually does. Because, if anyone actually cared about the environment, there’s no way fountains would still exist. Fountains are a real big ‘f\*\*k you’ to thirsty people. Imagine bringing a little kid from a third-world country to see a fountain. He’d be like, (act-out) ‘Look at all the water! Can I have a sip?’ And you’d have to be like, ‘Oh, no, no! That’s for decoration.’ ‘Well, can I at least grab the money out of it?’ ‘No, those are for wishes and were thrown there by people that can afford to throw money. And you know what they didn’t wish for? Water. Now, come on, I’m gonna show you a water park. That’s where the water’s for peeing in.”*

### **Pro Tips on Getting Laughs with Act-Outs:**

- Increase your volume in the act-out
- Stand still on the setup and move around during the act-out
- Assume the posture and mannerisms of the character you’re acting out
- Exaggerate the emotion of the character you’re acting out

*Don’t think about act-outs. Jump into them! Let’s practice.*

## **Act-Out Practice Session 1**

Say these bits *out loud* to get the feel of doing an act-out.

“My father’s been on my ass my entire life, constantly questioning me. I was an altar boy, he asks me, (*actout*) ‘Do they pay you for this shit at the church? You making any money?’ I then ask the priest for a raise, (*act-out*) ‘Listen, we know what’s going on here, you’re collecting a lot of money during the mass, and no one’s getting a cut.’ The priest is like, (*act-out*) ‘We don’t pay for mass, we only pay for funerals.’ I say, ‘Put me on the funeral circuit, I’ll start working funerals!’

—Sebastian Maniscalso

“It’s weird how you can tell a lot about a guy by the way they play tennis. I played with this one guy and he couldn’t say ‘thirty-love.’ He keeps saying (*actout*) ‘Thirty-I really like you, but I still have to see other people.’

—Rita Rudner

“You ever walked into a plate-glass window? What’s weird is—two things are happening there. Pain and embarrassment, but pain takes a back seat to embarrassment, doesn’t it? Because, no matter how much pain you’re in, people are laughing. You just laugh along with them. (*act-*

out) ‘Oh, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Bam! I just slammed right into that, didn’t I? Isn’t that funny? It’s so clean and shiny. Someone should put a sticker or a happy face or something. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Isn’t that funny? Oh my, is that blood? Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! I’m bleeding. Isn’t that funny I’m bleeding? Oh my! Can you help me find my eye?’

**—Ellen DeGeneres**

Go to [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) to see videos of this technique. Compare your delivery style with theirs!

Still writing your Morning Pages every day as well as doing the exercises? Like Taylor Swift’s photo album, your calendar should be full of X’s. Remember: you have the same number of hours in a day as Jerry Seinfeld!

*Got the feel of doing an act-out? Now, let’s learn how to setup an actout.*

## **Act-Out Practice Session 2**

Now that you’ve got the feeling of going into an act-out, below are some setups for you to do your own. Remember, act-outs *always* include speaking words, not just making sound effects. Try finishing these setups with your own thoughts:

*“Mothers are hard on their daughters. My mother is overly critical about my weight. I could win the Nobel Peace Prize and she would be saying...”* Do an act-out of your mother telling you she’s happy you won the prize while also criticizing your appearance.

*“Politicians lie. When they say, ‘I’m going to create new jobs and prosperity,’ what they’re really saying is ...”* Do an act-out of a politician saying what’s really going to happen.

*“Some days are just so hard. I had such a horrible day. It was as if when God was making plans for my day, he was going ...”* Do an act-out of God planning your bad day.

*“Last night I got sick after eating at a sketchy restaurant. It was as if my stomach was going ...”* Do an act-out of your stomach criticizing your choice of restaurants.

## **EXERCISE 12: Adding Act-Outs to Your Jokes in Progress**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 12: Adding Act-Outs to My Jokes**

#### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

*“Can an act-out really help my rants?”*

Yes! In this exercise, you’ll work with the best results from your rants, making them funnier with act-outs. First, review your mind-maps from Exercise 10, then get together with your Comedy Buddy. Take turns with one of you being the comic (standing) and the other being the comedy writer (sitting). Start each of your jokes with what’s hard, weird, scary, or stupid about your topic, and this time, *drive your setup to an act-out*. Every

person you mention in your setup must be acted out. If you're having trouble getting into character, have your Comedy Buddy shout, "Do an act-out!" and immediately become the person in your joke. Don't think—just do it.

Write down all possible jokes in the "Jokes in Progress by Topic" section of your workbook. Be sure to write descriptions about the specific details in your act-outs that generated laughs from you or your buddy.

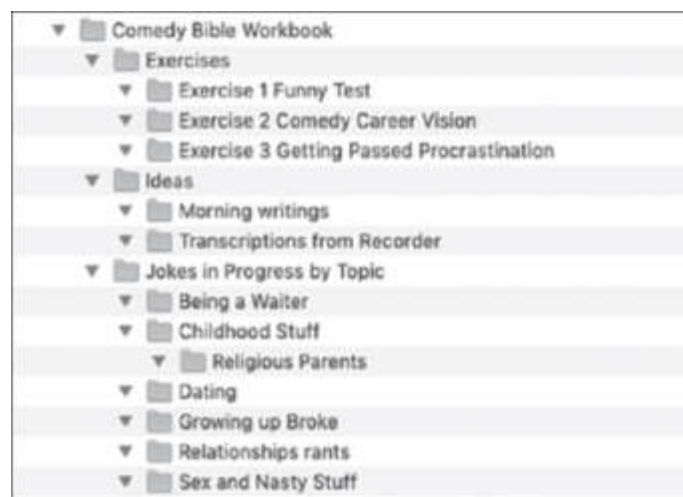
## EXERCISE 13: Organizing Your Jokes in Progress

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Jokes in Progress by Topic

By now you should have at least ten jokes with act-outs. This is the beginning of your act.

In this exercise, let's move some of your working material from the "Morning Writings" and "My Exercises" folders to "Jokes in Progress" and organize them by topic.



Now all your new material has a specific home in your Comedy Bible Workbook where you can easily find and improve it. Once you hone your jokes, you can move them to your “My Act” folder.

# Making Your Act-Outs Come Alive with Space Work

Let's add *commitment* to your act-outs by getting physical. When performing an act-out of someone smoking, rather than using a prop or just *saying* the character is smoking, pretend to hold the cigarette, then take a drag, flick the ashes, etc. For extra laughs, follow the action all the way through. When the joke's over, mime throwing the cigarette down and crushing it out on the floor before proceeding to your next setup. These actions create more believability and authenticity in your act-outs. In improv it's called *space work*.

## Pro Tips for Doing Space Work

1. Become conscious of the objects you use throughout the day. When holding a cocktail, notice the curve of your hand and fingers, the tension of your arm muscles, how you carry it, set it down, and how drunk you are. Create a heightened awareness of your everyday movements, which is important in physicalizing your act-outs.
  2. Practice doing everyday tasks without any physical objects, such as brushing your teeth and combing your hair. Can you keep the shape of your hand consistent without looking at it? Try it in front of a mirror. Repeat the action over and over. It takes a lot of focus, but repetition pays off and makes your act-outs more engaging.
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## Pro tip

When performing act-outs, face front or angle yourself 45 degrees to the audience. This staging helps differentiate between you and the character you're acting out. Never turn to the side so you're in profile, as that looks amateurish.

3. Practice keeping people or objects in a static position behind *the fourth wall*, which is the invisible wall between you and the audience. For instance, mime taking something out of a refrigerator, then go back to the refrigerator and put something away, then go back and take something else out. Are you able to return to the exact spot, pull the handle in the exact same way each time, as if there really is a refrigerator there? The audience will absolutely notice if the refrigerator “moves” during your act-out, so don't sell them short. If an act-out involves interacting with another person, then either keep that person in the same place, or even better, follow your “co-star” with your eyes to let the audience know he or she is moving.
4. Make the objects in your routine specific to you, so you really *see* them during the act-out. Picturing things is very powerful. Rather than just pretending you're speaking to your father, envision him holding one of your coffee cups. Is it made of glass or ceramic? Is there something written on it? Does it have a chip or flaw in it? Use that exact (pretend) cup in your act-out.

Space work is a powerful tool to create a reality out of nothing. You can learn more about it by taking an

improv class. Check with a local theater, comedy club, or go online to find a class in your area.

Act-outs are more than just your voice. They're also how you stand and move. When acting out your mother, stand like her. Move like her. When she walks, does she lead with her head, her shoulders? What does she do with her hands when she's talking? What's the cadence of her voice?

This is a good time to check your morning writing and see if there's a joke that you can add an act-out to. If so, transfer that joke to your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder.

*Next, let's practice adding space work to your act-outs.*

## **EXERCISE 14: Adding Space Work to Your Act-Outs**

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > Jokes in Progress by Topic > Making Act-Outs Come Alive**

### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

Using the jokes in your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder, rehearse your space work until it becomes second nature. You need to be able to speak while acting out your mini-scenes. Try your act-outs over and over with your Comedy Buddy until they feel comfortable and natural.

Go through each act-out to determine which ones you can add space work to. If there's a joke in which you're acting out your mom, try putting her in a very specific location. Rather than, *"There I am with my mom and she's saying..."* you would say and act-out,

"There I am in a restaurant with my mom. She's eating a salad and says..."

*As you go through your act-outs, add movement and physicality to help "find the funny."*

***"Help! I can't seem to get one of my topics to flow into an act-out."***

Chillax! Some of your topics and setups may not lead to act-outs. That's okay—it simply means you need a *turn*. You'll acquire that tool in the following section.

*Act-outs are one way to payoff a joke--another way is using a Turn.*

# Payoffs: The Turn

A turn is just what it means, a change of direction. Stand-up material has to travel. Where you *start* the joke is not where you *end* the joke. The turn is the surprise jump to something that the audience didn't expect. That surprise turn is what makes an audience laugh. Check out Anthony Jeselnik's joke to see how a turn works:

*"We just found out my little brother has a peanut allergy, which is very scary. But I still feel like my parents are totally overreacting. They caught me eating a tiny little bag of airline peanuts...(turn) and they kicked me out of his funeral."*

The master of turns is the one-liner king, Stephen Wright.

*"I installed a skylight in my apartment...the people who live above me are furious!"*

The biggest compliment a professional comic can give you is, "I didn't see that coming." The best comics suck the audience in with a setup, then surprise them by taking the joke to a place the audience didn't expect.

Drew Lynch killed on *America's Got Talent* by joking about his stutter. Notice how he leads people down a path of it "being hard to have a stutter," then switches the reality:

*"I have a hard time at the drive-thru because you gotta say the order fast and speak through the intercom. (turn) I have no idea why I work*

*there.”*

Drew gets the audience to *picture* him going to a drive-thru and gets the laugh by revealing he’s the one taking the orders.

In this joke, Amy Schumer’s mom is bragging about being able to still fit into her wedding dress. Schumer then surprises us with a turn:

*“My mom’s always bragging about the stupidest stuff. The other day she said, ‘You know I can still fit in my wedding dress.’ It’s like, who cares, right? (turn) It is weird that she’s the same size now that she was when she was eight months pregnant.”*

### **Pro Tip**

The turn has to be logical. Even though you take the joke in a completely different direction, there must be a connection between where you started and where you end; it has to make sense.

One of the masters of the turn is Wendy Liebman. Notice how she sets up a picture of a scene and then switches it:

*“(Weird...) today I found twenty dollars. Isn’t it fun when you find money? It was just sitting there! (turn) In the tip jar at Starbucks.”*

Watch how Liebman does two turns:

*“They say you fall in love when you least expect it. (turn) Like at your wedding. (turn) With your maid of honor.”*

*“It’s weird now that I’m in my fifties, I feel that I gain weight just by looking at a cake...(turn) that I’m finishing.”*

As you can see, pro comics, such as Liebman, do much more than talk about themselves. They use personal information as a *jumping-off point*. Meaning, they might start off talking about themselves, but they *expand* and turn in a direction that surprises the audience.

### **Stand-up is personal, but it’s not therapy or storytelling.**

Perhaps you’ve seen someone bomb onstage while droning on and on about their life. So, what’s the difference between being authentic and being indulgent? The answer’s in the crafting of your material. Your personal life provides the inspiration for your act, but don’t just talk about what happened, do something with it. Take a leap of imagination and craft a turn.

*Before we add turns to some of your topics, let’s learn a classic turn technique called the “List of Three.”*

## **Turns: The List of Three**

A traditional way to write a turn joke is to use the “list of three” method. This technique involves starting a list of items that creates a pattern, then making the third item radically different to break the pattern. That creates a surprise, a jump, a *turn*.

For this method to work, it's an absolute necessity your first two statements be real and *serious* and *unfunny*. You want to lead the audience down a path of *sincerity*, and then surprise them with the *unexpected*. The emotion of being fooled is part of what makes people laugh, so you can't tip them off.

Try these two easy methods to set up a list of three: *big-big-small* and *small-small-big*.

### **List of Three: Big-Big-Small**

In this method, the first two items set up a pattern of *big*, important, serious, weighty stuff, and the third item is something *small*, inconsequential, or trivial.

Say this out loud:

*"The world's such a scary place now. We have political unrest around the world. We have unprecedented natural disasters. (turn) Diet Coke has changed its formula! Scary!"*

Notice how the attitude word "scary" sets the expectation that all three items are scary, but the first two are big/serious scary and the last one is small/trivial scary.

### **List of Three: Small-Small-Big**

Here's the reverse formula: two *small* items then one *big* item.

Read this joke out loud:

*"Breakups are hard because women (or men) don't pick up on clues. There are three subtle clues your relationship is over..."*

*You're not talking as much during dinner.* (Subtle/small)

*You're not getting those love notes anymore.* (Subtle/small)

*She issued a restraining order."* (Over-the-top obvious/big)

The key word in the setup is "subtle." So, the first two items have to set up the pattern by being subtle with small clues that aren't funny. The third one has to be big, over-the-top, and obvious: a turn.

Here's Amy Schumer's List of Three on how hard it is working on movies:

*"They (the producers) were like 'We want you to be in the movie' and I was like, 'Oh my God, me?' They were like, 'Yes. We just need you to do three things. One, just be yourself. Two, have fun. And three, stop eating food.' Now, I was like 'Wait a minute...'"*

Again, it's critically important the setup of the first two examples *not* be funny, weird, or strange at all. Save that for the turn, so the third one gets a big laugh.

### **List of Three for Corporate Gigs**

The List of Three method has never failed me. It worked particularly well once when I was hired to speak in front of a cosmetics company. Just before the event, management announced there'd be no bonuses that year. Since the employees were disgruntled, management asked me to do "something funny with that." Gee, thanks! Using the List of Three was the



solution I pulled from my comedy tool kit. Right before my keynote, the audience participated in a workshop on conceptual selling, which I sat in on to see if I could enhance anything in my set. My list went like this:

“I understand you learned today about conceptual selling. That means:

1. You aren’t selling lipstick, but rather the ‘concept’ of beauty.
2. It’s not about the mascara, but the ‘concept’ of glamour.
3. It’s not about the money, but the ‘concept’ of a bonus.”

It killed.

*Now, let’s practice creating turns doing Lists of Three.*

## **EXERCISE 15: Turn a Joke with a List of Three**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 15: Turns + List of Three**

Practice writing a list of three by finishing this setup:

*“Relationships are hard. There are three subtle clues your relationship’s over:*

*He's not listening when you talk...*

*You're not going out to dinner very often...*

*And..."*

What's a super obvious clue you've broken up?

Write the above in your Comedy Bible Workbook document "Exercise 15: Turns + List of 3."

Now, rewrite it, and make it even more obvious. For instance, if you wrote, "He's cheating on you," change it to, "His new girlfriend now stays for breakfast." Then make that even *more* obvious: "His new girlfriend moved in and she's using my toothbrush."

Then make it even *more* obvious and extreme. "His new girlfriend has moved in. She's using my toothbrush. And she hogs all the blankets."

I always like to repeat the premise at the end of the joke while the audience is laughing: "Yes, it's so *hard* to know when it's over." That's called a *tag*, and we'll discuss tags in a later chapter.

In your Comedy Bible Workbook, create multiple lists of three on the topic of "dead-end jobs."

Work is *hard*. There are three *subtle* clues you're in a dead-end job:

Small/subtle \_\_\_\_\_

Small/subtle \_\_\_\_\_

Big/obvious \_\_\_\_\_

## **List of Three: Obvious-Obvious-Weird**

Now let's practice with a different list of three: obvious-obvious-weird.

*“It’s scary how being broke creeps up on you. There are three signs you’re broke...”*

Write two unfunny (obvious) signs that you’re broke (because the setup is always unfunny).

Write these ideas in your Comedy Bible Workbook “Exercise 15: Turns + List of Three.”

Are your ideas along these lines?

*It’s scary how being broke creeps up on you. There are three signs you’re broke...*

*You can’t afford to go to fancy restaurants.*

*You’re taking on odd jobs. And...*

Here are some ideas for the turn from The Comedy Bible Facebook Group. Are any of yours weirder and funnier? Join to participate.

*“...you ask to sleep on your friend’s couch just so you can look for loose change.”* Adam Moyer

*“...getting paid triggers a call from your bank due to unusual activity.”* James Power *“...your new pick-up line is, ‘Are you going to finish that?’”* Judah Rosenstein

*“...dinner and a movie are free Costco samples followed by watching the TVs on display at Best Buy.”* Ivy Eisenberg

*“...you find a postage stamp in the bottom of your purse and it doubles your net worth.”* David Nikolas

*“...you’ve stopped paying compliments.”* Kim Wadsworth

In this next section, use obvious-obvious-weird.

Here's your setup:

*"It's scary to realize you have an addiction. You know it's time to stop drinking when..."*

Make the first two small or subtle. Don't try to be funny; just write down subtle signs that make you wonder if it's time to stop drinking.

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

Now, on the third reason, let your mind go and come up with an extreme and obvious reason why you need to stop drinking. Then, ratchet that up a few notches to *weird*. Write as many as possible in your Comedy Bible Workbook:

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Did you write something like this?

*"When you wake up in the morning it's the middle of next week."*

## **Adding Act-Outs After the Turn**

*"Judy, how do I choose between an act-out or a turn?"*

The short answer is you might have *both* in your routine, with both living in the same joke: an act-out, then a turn or a second turn, then a big act-out.

For instance, in the joke "Subtle clues your relationship's over," when you do the third one, "His new girlfriend has moved in. She's using my

toothbrush and hogging the blanket,” you can add an act-out there. Example:

*“But I’m standing up for myself. When they asked me to make breakfast I said, (act-out) ‘Hell no! I have some self-respect! You can just pour yourself a bowl of cereal! I’ll go to the store and get some milk.’”*

So, when doing turns, look to add an *act-out* at the end.

*Time to write some turns for your topics.*

## **EXERCISE 16: Writing Turns for Your Topics**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 16: Turns for My Topics**

To review: You’ve ranted and raved about your topics. You’ve added some act-outs to your material. Now you’ll pick several topics and try to come up with a turn by creating a List of Three.

Let’s add a List of Three to a few of your topics from Exercises 8 and 9 “Your Topics.” For example, if one of your topics is “Being raised by religious fanatics,” create a setup such as: *“It’s hard being raised by religious zealots. There are three subtle clues your parents are too religious...”*

Write two subtle things, then a third crazy/weird clue that your parents are overly religious. Try to follow it with an act-out.

Ali Wong’s topic below is “Asian women dating white men.” See how she adds a list of three at the end of the joke to get an extra laugh.

*“My husband is Asian. Which a lot of people find weird because, usually, Asian-American women who, like, you know, wear these kinda*

*glasses and have a lot of opinions, they like to date white dudes. You go to any hipster neighborhood in a major city in America and that shit is turning into a Yoko Ono factory (laughs)...But, white dudes, they teach you about a lot of cool stuff like (List of Three) voting, recycling, and disturbing documentaries.”*

1. Go through all your topics and see which ones you can turn into a List of Three.
2. Write them in your Comedy Bible Workbook document “Exercise 16: Turns for My Topics.”

## **Comedy Bible Workbook > Jokes in Progress by Topic**

Copy and paste at least three of your lists of three into your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder, in the document with the correct topic.



Take a bow. You now know how to turn a joke. Before we move on to mixes, heed this warning.

**Warning!** Don't sabotage yourself by ignoring the topics you came up with while mind-mapping “Exercise 8: My Topics” and “Exercise 9: My Best Three Topics.” It's tempting to think you haven't come up with enough funny stuff at this point. Some students start thinking

there's a problem with their original topics, while some keep changing their topics so by the end of the workshop, they have nothing. The students who keep to their original topics and try new techniques, new act-outs, and new turns, always make their authentic topics funny. These comics kill on stage. Remember, your topic itself is not supposed to be funny. It's what you do with it. It's imperative you stick with your original, authentic topics.

## Writing Turns: Starting with the Punchline

In the last exercise, you began with a setup to create a List of Three. As you may have guessed, there are other ways to create turns. One is by working backward. That means you start at end of the joke and then find an interesting way to make it into a turn.

A two-time winner of the “Funniest Joke of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival,” comic Tim Vine is an expert at creating one-liners:

*“I decided to sell my Hoover...Well, it was just collecting dust.”*

Working backward, Vine generates fifteen new jokes per day, writing from punchline to setup. His method?

*“I hear punchlines in everyday conversation and think, ‘How could we get there in a different way?’ If someone says, ‘Serves him right,’ I’ll think, ‘Right, OK...A friend of mine’s got a left arm missing. Serves him right.’”*

An advantage of going backward is to get a laugh while giving information. The mark of an amateur is giving *just the facts* such as, “I got a divorce,” or “I’m single,” and not ending with a laugh. *Everything* you say onstage is either part of a setup, an act-out, or a turn. This guarantees more laughs.

*Before moving on, try writing a setup for this punchline: “I divorced my husband/wife!” Got the setup?*

## **EXERCISE 17: Creating Turns Starting with the Punchline**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 17: Creating Turns Starting With the Punchline**

How did you do with creating a turn by starting with the punchline, “I divorced my husband/wife!”?

Here’s one way: *“I just lost 150 pounds...I divorced my husband/wife!”*

1. Look through your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder, or your ranting and ravings. What information do you give to the audience? Such as:

*“I’m happy to be here!”*

It’s something comics say all the time, but Jim Jeffries makes it a punchline.



“I now have a child...so boy am I happy to be here!”

2. Write down something hard, weird, scary, or stupid, that happened to you, then write five ways to set it up. For instance, Wendy Liebman found her Fitbit (a gadget you wear on your wrist to track steps) in her dryer.

*“I lost my Fitbit, but it still was racking up steps—like 20,000 a day. I thought maybe an Olympian was wearing it. But then...I found it in the dryer.”*

Put all material you’ve written into “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder in your Comedy Bible Workbook.

From this point on, move any material that works from your idea or exercise folders to your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder.

*Now, let’s move on to mixes—a fantastic recipe for laughs.*

# Payoffs: Mixes – *“It’s just like...”*

A solid way to *turn* a joke is by doing a *mix*, which is finding a correlation between two unrelated topics. Here Australian comic Adam Hills finds a connection between the global financial crisis and his father. Brilliant!

*“I had no idea about the global financial crisis. Watching it unfold was like watching my father being molested by a clown. I knew it was going to affect me, I just wasn’t entirely sure how.”*

A mix occurs after a joke setup. It usually starts with:

*“Can you imagine if...”*

*“What if...”*

*“That’s like...”*

Mixes are almost always followed by an act-out. Comedian and writer Neal Brennan on the topic of landlords uses a mix/act-out:

*“The worst part about a landlord is having to call your landlord ‘Land Lord.’ Kind of an exaggerated title for a guy who rents rooms to strangers for money. (mix) It’s like there’s something medieval about the whole thing. So, whenever I see my landlord now, I’m like (mix/*

act-out) *‘My Lord...I come to thee from the kingdom of apartment 4J.’”*

Brennan sets up his joke with the attitude *scary*, then adds a *mix* by saying, *“It’s like there’s something medieval about the whole thing...”* then he goes into an *act-out*, which is where he gets the laugh.

“It’s hard to get anyone in LA to protest anything unless you convince them they will lose weight. I’ve had to explain to people, ‘Come on! Marching...it’s like...aerobics with a cause. Come on! We’re going to be sweating to our civil liberties.

**—Judy Carter**

Say the jokes below out loud to get a feel for mixes starting with, *“It’s like...”*

Speaking other people’s material aloud provides the feeling of doing mixes/act-outs.

Chris Rock on divorce:

*“Weird thing about divorce is that after the custody battle, you gotta divide the money. Whoever makes the most money has to pay the legal fees for the other person. So, I had to pay for a lawyer to divorce me. That’s like hiring a hitman, to kill you. (Mix/act-out) ‘Okay, here’s a picture of me. I’m gonna be at Burger King at 10:38 p.m. Shoot me in the head and give me a call.’”*

Below, comic Paul Elia takes his topic, “Being Chaldean,” and mixes in the subtopic Airbnb.

*“Chaldeans live in Iraq. Unfortunately, we don’t have our own country. It’s like we’re using Iraq as an Airbnb. (Mix/act-out) ‘Great place to vacation! They’re very flexible with the checkout time. The wi-fi password is SADDAMI—all caps!’”*

Jerry Seinfeld illustrates how horrible buffets are by using a mix.

*“The buffet is basically the answer to the question, ‘Okay, things are bad, how can we make them worse?’ How can we design a food-human-interactive environment? That’s like driving your dog up to Petco, giving him money, and saying, (mix/act-out) ‘Why don’t you go in and get whatever you think you should have?’”*

Comic Fahim Anwar’s scary topic is “Bees.” Notice how he mixes in “Guns.”

*“No one cares about flies. You can just swat them. But we don’t do that with bees because they have the ability to sting you. So, there’s a level of respect. A bee is basically like a fly with a gun. People act the same way, too, ‘Oh shit! It’s a bee; let him do whatever he wants... We don’t have any honey, okay? Here’s an empty Coke can, just leave!’”*

### **Remember the first comedy commandment!**

Jokes in this book are not for you to steal, but rather for you to learn from.

*In the next section, your imagination will expand to create your own mixes.*

## **EXERCISE 18: Practice Mix Session**

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 18: Practice Mix Session

In Exercise 1 you were given this line:

*“A pen is just like sex because...”*

This is a mix. Now let’s practice creating mixes.

The topic is “pens” and we’re mixing in a seemingly unrelated topic. Let’s justify this comparison.

Some people can do this in their heads, but for others it’s helpful to make a list of things associated with pens, and things associated with sex, then look for areas where they intersect. The most important element of a mix is that it has to *make sense*. A sure way of losing an audience is to *not* make sense.

For example:

**Makes sense:**

A pen is just like sex because *it never seems to be around when you need it.*

**Does not make sense:**

*“A pen is just like sex because they are both encased in plastic.”*

The audience will be working their left brains overtime trying to figure out what they’re missing, and they *won’t* be laughing: “Huh? What does that mean? Sex is encased in plastic? What?”

“My jokes have a lot of logic. No matter how crazy they are, they have to make absolute sense or they won’t be funny.”

—Steven Wright

Remember: your joke has to be logical.

“Politicians are a lot like diapers. They should be changed frequently, and for the same reasons.

—Robin Williams

*Let’s now do a practice mix session.*

## **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 18: Practice Mix Session**

Now you try it. Write ten comparisons of “pens” to “sex” in your Comedy Bible Workbook.

“A pen is just like sex because...”

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

Which answer works best? If none are that great, don’t worry! Just write *more*. If ten doesn’t work, write twenty. Sometimes the best stuff emerges when you feel like quitting but force yourself to press on.

Look through your “Ideas” folder. Are there any ideas that can inspire a mix? Give it a go and see if anything’s worthy of transferring to your

“Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder, or even your “My Act” folder for your more polished jokes. Now, let’s use mixes to create funny material about your family.

## Family Jokes Mixes

Odds are pretty good that one of your thirty authentic topics from Exercise 8: “Finding Your Authentic Topics” includes someone in your family. Let’s build on this.

***“But my family would get so upset if they knew I was joking about them in public!”***

Virtually all of my students are initially concerned about their family’s reactions to jokes about them. Is this a betrayal of their family? No. Not if it’s done right.

Because everyone deals with family issues, doing jokes about your closest relatives is a surefire way to connect with an audience. Do *not* skip this section because you’re nervous about the reaction of others. It’s critical for *all* comics to reveal secrets about themselves, their lives, and their families. Comedy must include truth telling, and that involves truths about family members. But, using a mix, we *start* with the truth and then *mix* in something we make up.

“I can honestly say, after talking about my mom passing away, I got the biggest weight off of my chest. Comedy is my therapy. That’s how I deal with my problems, my personal battles. I talk about it. I give it to my fans. When they laugh at it, it’s a release.”

—Kevin Hart

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Hasan Minhaj jokes about his immigrant parents having secrets. Notice the act-out and the mix at the end that starts with “*It’s like...*”

*“My parents are immigrants. And because they are immigrants, they love secrets. They love bottling things deep down inside of themselves... and then unleashing them thirty years later when it’s no longer relevant. So, you’ll be sitting there eating dinner and suddenly, (act-out) ‘What? Mom’s a ninja? Dad’s a communist? Why are you telling me this now?’ (mix) It’s like every conversation with my father is a M. Night Shyamalan movie where it’s just ninety minutes of buildup to no payoff.”*

When my students appeared at LA’s Hollywood Improv on showcase night, family members who were characters in their act were almost universally *flattered* about being included. In fact, those who weren’t included often felt left out. To their surprise, and relief, some family members even added, “Hey, you forgot some other crazy things I do.”

*In this next exercise, you’ll learn how to use mixes to turn your crazy family into comedy gold.*

## **EXERCISE 19: Mixes—Finding Funny in Your Family**

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 19:  
Family Jokes Using Mixes**



## Comedy Buddy Exercise

What follows is a solid method for writing jokes, with turns, about your family. Make sure everything you write is based on truth.

### Can a comic really trash family?

The basic rule of joking about your family is to first establish that you love them. Such as, “I love my mom... she’s great...but a bit crazy...” Only then can you go into their annoyances. It’s interesting to note that audiences seem to turn on men harshly criticizing their mothers. Daughters, on the other hand, can get away with more biting commentary about their moms, dads, and everyone else. Not sure why, but when the men in my class don’t heed my advice, I’ve seen their acts go south pretty quickly. One student, joking about his mom at a showcase, had a woman in the audience shout, “She gave birth to you, a-hole!” The choice is yours.

## Five-Step Mix Method

1. *My* (insert family member, e.g., Mom, Dad, Grandma)
2. Insert attitude: Hard, weird, scary, or stupid... For instance, “Mom was *scary*...” “Grandpa was *weird*...”
3. *Because...*s/he was often very (insert disturbing quality, e.g., self-obsessed, overly helpful, angry, foul mouthed, bitter, fearful,

confused)

4. Do an exaggerated act-out of her/him in a scene, talking to someone, illustrating that disturbing quality. If your mother's very *angry*, then put her in a scene exaggerating just how angry she is.
5. Say, "Can you imagine my (family member) as a (insert unlikely profession for someone with that disturbing quality)?" Act-out the mix of your relative with the disturbing quality in an unlikely profession.


Follow this method, in which you'll do *two act-outs* and a *mix/turn* using a family member as your topic. For instance:

*"It's hard growing up with a mother who is self-absorbed."*

Now do an *act-out* of your mother being self-absorbed. Take on her mannerisms and exaggerate her self-absorption like this:

*I can't believe you're crying. Do you have any idea how much it hurts me to see you cry?*

Now mix in an unlikely profession for a person having that quality. For instance, for someone who is self-absorbed, an occupation in which that probably would not be an asset is a suicide hotline operator. *Act out* that scene as your mother, the suicide hotline operator.

 Can you imagine my mother as a suicide hotline operator?

'Hello suicide hotline? I just want to die. I'm on the ledge. I'm going to jump. I have no reason left to live!'

My mother would be on the phone saying, ‘All I hear from you people all day is ‘me, me, me!’ Everything is not about you! (Pause) Hello? Hello?’

—Annabelle Baumann

### **Mix/Act-Out Pro Tip**

When doing an act-out of your family member in another occupation, delay the reveal of their negative quality. When acting out your self-absorbed mother as a suicide hotline operator, don’t lead the act-out with her being self-absorbed—build to it.

“Hello, Suicide Prevention Hotline, we’re here to help.”

(Acting out talking on phone:) “I’m on the roof of a building! I’m going to jump! My boyfriend dumped me. I hate my life...”

“Well, I hate my life too! Do you know how difficult it is listening to depressed people like you every day? Do you have any idea how hard my life is? My hairdresser canceled on me today. (Pause) Hello? Hello?”

Make a document in your “Exercises” folder named “Exercise 19: Family Jokes Using Mixes.” Work with your Comedy Buddy on coming up with occupations for those family members whose negative qualities would be a disaster. Examples:

- If your father's disturbing quality is that he's a gossip, you could go with, *"Can you imagine my father as an FBI agent or a magician who can't keep a secret?"*
- Got an ex-military, controlling uncle who barks orders? Then act out a scene of him as a children's birthday clown.
- Is your sister angry and bitter? Act out a scene with her as a meditation guru.
- Now, do the above Five-Step Mix Method about one of your irritating family members, and put the material you come up with in this document as well.

### **More Pro Tips on Act-Outs:**

- When acting out a scene, keep it short. Don't go back and forth with a lot of dialogue—it's a joke, not a play
- Always end an act-out with a laugh line
- If the other person in the scene gives a funny line, make sure you have the topper. You might be a loser in life, but onstage, you're the winner

**Try it! Getting a laugh is often better than therapy!**

Remember to copy and paste your best jokes into your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder in the appropriate topic document so it's easy to find and improve them.

This is a good time to transfer material from your “Ideas” and “Exercises” folders to your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder. Look for topics, ideas and things you’re pissed off about. You just might find a mix that will turn a lame idea into killer material.

## EXERCISE 20: Expanding Your Material with Mixes

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 20: Adding Mixes to My Jokes

#### Comedy Buddy Exercise

By now you should have a lot of rough stand-up material, including topics with act-outs and turns. Let’s look through your material and see where we can *add a mix*.

Working with your Comedy Buddy, read your material out loud and, at the end of each joke, ask:

- “*What if...*”
- “*That’s just like...*”
- “*Can you imagine if...*”

See if there’s something you can mix in. Then add a mix/act-out like you did in Exercise 18: Practice Mix Session.

Comic Russell Peters gets a huge laugh by using a mix on the topic “arranged marriages.”

*“Arranged marriages are scary. It’s a big problem in my community. My parents tried that on me last year. My mom goes, ‘Russell, you’re getting older now and you’re not married. What if I bring some nice girls home for you?’ My mom wanted to pick my wife. I wouldn’t even let her pick my clothes. I can just imagine her like, ‘I know she’s a little big now, but you will grow into her.’”*

For a minimum of thirty minutes, work with your Comedy Buddy on adding mixes to your material. It may be hard, but remember, every joke doesn’t have to have a mix. Consider yourself brilliant if you found five mixes out of thirty jokes. Write them in your Comedy Bible Workbook and transfer your favorites to your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder.

Wow! You’ve been busy. Let’s take a moment to review what you’ve done so far.

## **Creating Comedy Material Review**

- You found a lot of *authentic topics*.
- You narrowed them down to your *best three topics*.
- You found subtopics and microtopics using *mind-mapping*.
- You ranted and raved with *attitude*.
- You learned how to pay off a joke with an *act-out*.
- You’ve practiced space work when doing an *act-out*.
- You learned how to add a *turn* to a joke by adding a *List of Three* or a *mix*.

- You've created a *turn* by starting with the punchline and working backward.
- You added *mixes* by doing a joke about a *family member*.
- You added more *mixes* to your existing material.

*Your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder should be filling up with material. Now let's carve that material into a killer stand-up act and start transferring jokes to your "My Act > Polished Jokes by Topic" Folder. One way to do this is using a very valuable tool.*

Check in: Did you write for at least ten minutes today?  
How's your wall calendar chain looking? Are you  
recording funny thoughts and experiences throughout  
the day?

# PART 3



Stand-Up Structure:  
Sixteen Prompts to  
Write like a Pro



# Using Stand-up Structure to Polish Your Jokes

In this section, I'm going to disclose something you're probably already doing—putting your jokes into stand-up structure. Understanding the structure of a joke helps to get a laugh every ten seconds. You'll be going over all your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder and rewriting to fit this structure and then transferring the winners to your “Polished Jokes by Topic” folder.

## Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act > Polished Jokes > Joke Structure

*“Judy, I’m going to skip this part because I don’t need to learn joke structure. If I use a formula, I’ll sound hack.”*

I get it. You're a *rebel*. You don't follow rules. Guess what? Most successful comics follow this structure. Matter of fact, getting into this chapter, you'll find that many of the jokes you've already written fall into this structure. Musicians learn scales. Artists learn composition. Comics need to learn joke structure. It will save you at least five years of onstage trial and error.

Let's work on your act. In your Comedy Bible Workbook's folder called “Polished Jokes by Topic,” make a document called “Stand-Up

Structure.” Copy this structure into that document and use it to evaluate and polish your jokes.

**SETUP:**

**“Topic is...”**

**+ ATTITUDE: “hard, weird, scary, stupid...”**

**+**

**PREMISE: “*Because...*”**

*(Insightful reason why the topic is hard, weird, scary, or stupid)*

**+**

**PAYOFF: Act-out, turn and/or mix**

**+**

**Tag**

**(Repeat of attitude/comment)**

Robin Williams was known for improving material off the top of his head. But if you look at his jokes, they are, for the most part, in perfect joke structure.

For example:

*“It’s weird how British police deal with crime because...in England, if you commit a crime, the police don’t have a gun and you don’t have a gun. If you commit a crime, the police will say, ‘Stop, or I’ll say stop again.’ It’s weird...”*

Topic = “How British police deal with crime”

Attitude = “Weird”

Premise = “Because...in England, if you commit a crime, the police don’t have a gun and you don’t have a gun...”

Payoff/act-out = “Stop, or I’ll say stop again.”



You’re looking at the secret sauce of writing pro comedy material. Why did I wait until the middle of the book to reveal it? Because I wanted you to organically experience writing material from your emotions. Chances are that a lot of your material is already in this structure. You’ll find jokes that aren’t in this format don’t get laughs as quickly. That’s because they’re usually in a story format. This is the structure that works with a drinking comedy club audience.

Let’s go through the details of each part of this Stand-Up Structure. Each joke has a:

## Setup:

**Topic.** One of your potential topics from Exercise 8. You have at least thirty of these.

**Attitude.** Pick one: *hard*, *weird*, *scary*, or *stupid*. You ranted and raved using these attitudes and should be getting good at portraying each of them.

**Premise.** An insight, often called your take, hit, or opinion on the topic. It follows the word “Because...” The premise tells the audience *why* your topic is *hard*, or *weird*, or *scary*, or *stupid*. (We’ll cover this in more detail later.)

## Payoff:

**Act-out.** Begin acting out a character’s mannerisms, language, accent, cadence, etc. Some of these were developed in the family jokes during Exercise 20, and we’ll create an even wider array of them soon.

**Turn.** Your List of Three statements from Exercise 17.

**Mixes.** “What if...” “Imagine if...” ideas you recorded in Exercise 20.

**Tag.** The end of the joke, and a simple repeat of the *attitude* while the audience is laughing. Such as, “Yeah...that’s scary!” Or, “Weird... isn’t that weird?”

A tag can also be a comment on the joke, the audience’s reaction, or the audience’s lack of reaction. (We’ll cover this in more detail later in the chapter.)

Some of you are undoubtedly thinking:

***“Judy, I want to be like Chris Rock and just rant and be wild onstage and say what’s on my mind! Formulas are hack!”***

Well, take that joint out of your mouth, sober up, and listen! Because guess what—Rock’s jokes are in *perfect* stand-up structure.

*“It’s weird that whenever the cops gun down an innocent black man they always say the same things, man. They always say the same thing. It’s like, ‘Well, it’s not most cops. It’s just a few bad apples.’ Bad apple? That’s a lovely name for a murderer...That almost sounds nice. I mean, I’ve had a bad apple. It was tart. But it didn’t choke me out.*

*“It’s hard being a cop. I know it’s hard because that shit’s dangerous. I know it is, ok? But some jobs can’t have bad apples. Because...some jobs, everybody gotta be good. Like...(mix) pilots. You know? American Airlines can’t be like, ‘Most of our pilots like to land. We just got a few bad apples that like to crash into mountains. Please bear with us.’”*

Rock starts with the *attitude* “It’s hard being a cop.” He goes into his *premise* that starts with *because*: “Because, that’s shit’s dangerous, but some jobs can’t have bad apples...” Then he goes into a mix/act-out. ‘Most

*of our pilots like to land. We just got a few bad apples that like to crash into mountains. Please bear with us.’”*

Let’s dissect some more jokes to see how they fit into this stand-up structure. Try identifying the topic, attitude, premise, payoff, and tag in each one. Especially focus on what you think makes the *premise* work. Ninety percent of the time, when a joke fails, it’s because the premise is missing or faulty.

“It’s weird when they talk about the economy on the news because they make it seem like everyone is rich. They’re like, ‘Global economic meltdown... is your money safe?’ ‘Uhh...you mean the \$43 in my checking account? It should be okay.’ Yeah, it’s weird.

**—Neal Brennan**

In Brennan’s joke he introduces the *topic* (“talk about the economy on the news”) with an *attitude* (weird). Then he delivers the *premise* and tells us *why* talk about the economy on the news is *weird*. Notice the premise is his insight or observation. It’s *never* a *story*.

**Right Way:**

It’s weird “*Because they make it seem like everyone is rich.*”

**Wrong Way:**

“*It’s weird when they talk about the economy on the news because I was watching the news and this guy comes on and starts talking about how everyone is rich. And I thought...*”

Next, he *acts out* a funny retort:

*“They’re like (act-out news voice) ‘Global economic meltdown ... is your money safe?’ (act-out as himself) Uhh...you mean the \$43 in my checking account? It should be okay.”*

While everyone is laughing, he tags it with a repeat of the premise:  
*“Yeah, it’s weird.”*

If you’re still on the fence about this structure, study your favorite comic.

Next time you go to a comedy show, notice or even sit near the comics at the back of the room. They generally *do not* laugh, but they study their fellow performers onstage. Sometimes they’ll say, in a monotone voice, “That’s funny. I like where she went with that.” Or they’ll comment on how they’d extend a particular joke, like, “There was more to that premise.”

When *The Comedy Bible* was translated into Russian, I was worried whether or not this joke structure would work in a different culture. I found out that it did when I taught a Comedy Workshop in Moscow. The proof that this format is universal came on showcase night, when my students generated laughs every ten seconds. Since then, I’ve done workshops in Sweden, London, China, Canada, Germany, and Australia and I’m looking to do more international comedy workshops.

**“Is comedy structure just for American comics?”**

***“Hey, Judy, my favorite comic doesn’t mention any attitude word. What gives?”***

Although all jokes have a specific attitude, it’s not always necessary to state them out loud. When creating material, it’s best to use attitude words, but some comics simply *convey* the attitude of the joke using only their energy and/or body language.

Ali Wong doesn't have to say she thinks Sheryl Sandberg's book is *stupid* as she conveys the attitude in the way she says the joke:

*"I don't wanna work anymore. I've been reading that book by Sheryl Sandberg, she's the COO of Facebook, and she wrote that book that got women all riled up about our careers. Talking about how we as women should challenge ourselves to sit at the table and rise to the top. And her book is called Lean In. Well, I don't wanna lean in, OK? I wanna lie down. I want to lie the f\*\*\*k down."*

## **Before you break the rules, *learn them.***

When you become a pro, you can embed jokes with attitude words without actually saying them. Until then, saying them out loud now will absolutely help you create good material. The attitude word either follows the topic or comes before it, such as,

"Dating is *hard*..."

or

"You know what's *hard* about dating...?"

Many forms of stand-up don't exactly fit into the structure you're learning here, including absurdist comedy, alternative comedy, anticomedy, cringe comedy, prop comedy, storytelling, and so on.

But, here's the thing: before you modify the rules, you need to perfect them. That's why doing the exercises in this book is *soooooooo* important. Remember, we're still building your comedy muscles. You'll know when the time is right to stretch them.

*Now, let's develop your comedy by researching pro comics.*


## **EXERCISE 21: RESEARCHING PRO COMICS**

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 21: Researching Pro Comics for Joke Structure

Study this joke:

 (Cooking shows on TV are stupid...) I will never understand why they cook on TV because I can't smell it, can't eat it, can't taste it. The end of the show they hold it up to the camera, 'Well, here it is. You can't have any. Thanks for watching. Goodbye.'

—Jerry Seinfeld

1. What are the topic and attitude?
2. What's the premise?
3. What's the payoff?

Watch three minutes of one of the comics at [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) in the Exercises section and answer these questions:

1. How many laughs did the comic get in three minutes?
2. How many laughs is that per minute?
3. How many seconds were there between laughs?

Write out one of their jokes and answer the following:

4. What was the setup?



5. What was the attitude/emotion conveyed in the setup? “Hard,” “Weird,” “Scary,” or “Stupid?” (Did they say it or imply it?)
6. What was the topic of the joke?
7. What was the premise of the joke?
8. On the payoff/laugh: Was there an act-out? Was a surprise/turn revealed?
9. Did the comic then do another joke on the same topic, building a *chunk* on that topic?

*The majority of beginning comics think that the most important part of a joke is the payoff. Not so. It's the setup. If you don't rope the audience in at the beginning of a joke, they won't be there to laugh at the end.*

# The Setup: Maximizing Laughs

Congratulations. You now know *all* the *components* of writing a great joke, *and* you understand the foundation of stand-up comedy structure.

So far, we've focused on, and practiced, writing the funny part of a joke. But in this section, you'll learn more how to create a great *setup* that has these components:

Topic + Attitude + Premise



Most comics agree the funny part of a joke is easy when you have a good setup. But setting up a joke can be hard. If the audience doesn't connect with your setup, they'll totally miss the funny part. To get people to laugh, you have to suck them into your Point of View (POV) and hook them into your premise. A bad setup turns off an audience because they're not *with* you. After several bad setups in a row, you'll lose the audience and may never get them back.

Components of a good setup:

- Background info is delivered *before* you get into the setup.
- It builds a bridge to the audience.
- It usually doesn't include first person pronouns: *I*, *me*, or *my*.

- It teases the audience into the subject matter.
- It leads the audience down a path that unexpectedly changes direction.
- It consists of *attitude* about a *topic*, and a *premise* (opinion) about that topic.
- It describes how you *feel* about the topic.
- It's usually *not* funny, which gives you a place to *go*.

Chances are if you're not getting a laugh, it's *not* because your joke isn't funny, it's because you didn't set it up right.

Here are some examples of *horrible* setups:

**Bad Setup #1: “Let me tell you a little about myself...”**

The *worst* setup in the world. And it's used by 80 percent of new comics, especially in LA (aka the land of narcissism).

Besides being grossly overused and unoriginal, it makes an erroneous assumption: the audience is interested in you simply because you're standing on a stage with a mic in your hand. *Never forget how wrong this assumption is.* Your job is to *make them* interested in you. Don't waste time talking about your background. Only your mother cares. *Start* with your point of view on the *topic*.

**Bad Setup #2: “This is really true.”**

Another flawed setup too many comics use is, “So, this really happened to me.” As in, “I *really* brushed my teeth this morning.” Really? So what? Just because something's true doesn't make it inherently interesting. And should the audience assume everything else in your act is a lie? This setup undermines your credibility with no real upside benefit. *Don't* use it.

**Bad Setup #3: “So there I was...”**

If you start with anything like, “Yesterday, *there I was* at the store and this guy comes over to me...” This is *not* a setup; it’s the start of a *story*. If your act is telling the audience *what happened* to you rather than having an *opinion about a topic*, you’ll most likely end up with flat, unfunny material. Also, good stand-up comedy material is almost always in *present tense*: “*I am...*” rather than “*I was...*” because it’s about the opinions you currently hold.

***“But, Judy, a lot of comics tell short stories as lead-ins to jokes. So, what gives?”***

Very often it’s necessary, before getting into the joke, to give information and tell a little story. For instance, in the below material, Mike Birbiglia gives information about a time in his life when he was broke. But when he gets into the funny part, he goes into classic stand-up structure. Then he sets up the funny part with attitude (*weird*).

(Story) “*Yeah, I remember that period of my life so well. I was so broke. I was actually living on an air mattress in Queens, and I couldn’t afford a dresser for my clothes.*”

(Start of the joke) *It’s weird when you’re broke, because everything is just low to the ground. You roll off your air mattress in the morning, grab pants from the floor, you cook noodles on a hot plate. One falls out of your mouth, you’re like, ‘It’s not too far.’ The only way you could get lower is if you died.*”

Notice how Birbiglia’s story is in *past tense* and when he goes into the funny part, he shifts to *present tense*. You can always tell stories, but know that to get the laugh you need to get to a setup and a payoff.

#### **Bad Setup #4: Irrational, Unrelatable Statements**

I’ve actually heard a comic open with, “So I was f\*\*king this sandwich...” Not surprised I never saw this person on any comedy circuit

again. Why? Because *no one* could relate to or even understand what he was talking about. Not understanding what you're talking about is a surefire way to lose an audience. Perplexed people don't laugh.

## Elements of Good Setups

*“Judy, how do I know when I have a good setup?”*

### 1. A good setup lures the audience into the subject matter

The next time you're watching TV, notice the power of a *teaser*. Watch the host hold the audience through a commercial with, “Stay tuned, as our next guest has lost so much weight, you won't recognize him...”

We want to know, “Who is it? Will I recognize him? I wonder how he did it?” We want our questions answered and to see the mystery solved. As social media has proven, human minds obsess over the need to know. With that in mind, every one of your jokes must have a *hook* to get the audience's attention and hold their interest until the punchline. How? Set up a joke with a strong emotion about a topic so the audience wants to know *why* you feel this way about this topic.

Tom Papa jokes about how hard marriage is because it changes a relationship. Notice how Papa chooses two attitude words in this joke and then pays it off with an act-out of his wife giving a scary response.

*“When you've been married for a long time it's hard trying to keep the sexual vibe going. You've got to be careful because if you try to spice it up and try a new move in the middle of lovemaking, that's always scary because if she's happy at the end she just stares at me and says, (suspiciously) ‘Where the hell did you learn that?’”*

### 2. A good setup leads to the funny, but it's *not* funny.

New comics have a tough time understanding that a joke starts out *not funny*. The setup is *authentic, true, and relatable*. It *must* be clear, and it *must* make sense. It also has emotion. The emotion establishes your *attitude* about this topic. You're going to start serious, hook the audience in, and *then* hit 'em with the turn. Think about it, if you start out a joke with the funny part, you've got no place to go.

### **3. A good setup is a *universal truth* and doesn't use these words: I, me, or my.**

Now, sometimes you *do* need to give a few sentences of story background *before* you get into your joke.

Example of using background story:

*"This is my first time in Kansas. I'm from LA. What a friendly place. I'm in an elevator and someone said, 'Good morning!'"*

But once your background material is over, you go into your setup:

*"It's scary how people in the Midwest talk to total strangers in an elevator because, in LA, the only time people talk to you is if they're on ecstasy.*

(Act-out) *"Ahhh! What do you want? Take my watch, but please don't hurt me."*

Tag: *"It's so scary..."*

### **4. A good setup makes sense.**

If your setup doesn't make sense, you're headed off a cliff. Why? The audience will be too busy trying to figure out what you said. They may turn to each other and say, "What'd she mean by that?" They'll disconnect from what's happening onstage.

Fun fact: being perplexed disconnects a human from the part of the brain that produces laughter.

## **5. A good setup is fueled with attitude.**

A setup without attitude is usually boring. It doesn't grab the audience. You don't need exaggerated emotions, but you must demonstrate your investment in the topic. Once again, the attitude words that generate the most laughs are *hard*, *weird*, *scary*, or *stupid*. Include one of these in all of your jokes until you get solid footing and are willing to play with less surefire emotions.

## **6. A good setup introduces the topic and the target of the joke.**

Each topic has a target you're making fun of.

So, "*Dating a pot smoker is scary because...*" tells the audience you'll be poking fun at pot smokers.

"*Going on a diet is hard if your spouse isn't dieting because...*" lets them know the target of the joke is your nondieting spouse.

## **7. A good setup is short.**

In a comedy club, you can't go more than a few seconds without laughs. Write out your setups and then, like writing a text message, cut out *all* the unnecessary words. As writer Malcolm Gladwell advises, "Think strong verbs, short sentences."

## **8. A setup has only one topic.**

An audience gets confused when hearing a set up with multiple topics. For instance, "*It's really hard when you're on a business trip in Miami, smoking a cigar, and a prostitute walks up to you...*"

Pick only one. Is the joke about a business trip to Miami, smoking a cigar, or a hooker? Introducing topics that don't pay off is the mark of an amateur.

## **9. A good setup sets up *why* the target of your joke deserves to be laughed at.**

Audiences do have a sense of fair play, and when you set up your joke, you have to ask yourself, “Does the target *deserve* to be made fun of?”

### **Joke Fairly**

“Most comedy is based on getting a laugh at somebody else's expense. And I find that that's just a form of bullying in a major way. So, I want to be an example that you can be funny and be kind, and make people laugh without hurting somebody else's feelings.”

—Ellen DeGeneres

The basic rule of comedy is not to bash others who are considered oppressed. This can be victims of violence, races other than your own, women, the LGBTQ community, and others. Setups can turn ugly if the audience feels you're unfairly targeting someone or something they care about. When I travel, I *never* poke fun of the city I'm visiting. Instead, I turn it around and poke fun of where I'm from (Los Angeles), and the audience loves it. Practice various target alternatives with your Comedy Buddy to determine which are funny, and at the same time aren't insensitive or tone deaf.



Eliminate or rewrite material that picks on easy targets. These setups make your jokes seem unfair, and worse, make you unlikeable. For too many years, male comics bashed women. That doesn't go over well anymore.

Example of a *bad premise*:

*Being overweight is hard for a woman because nobody finds overweight women attractive.*

Whether male or female, and regardless of your current weight, this premise is fat shaming and it might alienate you from the audience before getting to the punchline. Although this setup *does* fit into the topic-attitude-premise formula, it offers no original point of view, so cut it.

Go through all your material and identify the butt of each joke. Ask yourself if a target is in any way an underdog. If the answer is yes, leave that joke in your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder as it's not ready for prime time.

To revise a joke with an underdog as the target, first develop an original POV or premise. One way is to incorporate the notion of contrary thinking, that is, using a premise that reflects the *opposite* view of most people, and then logically justifying it. So, what would that look like for this same topic?

New premise: *Overweight women are hot.*

Next, you justify the claim with a setup:

*People who think all overweight women are unsexy are stupid, because they're obviously not paying attention.*

Now we have a strong *opinion*. And, if you're a male comic, a setup like this not only gets the audience's attention, you'll probably win points

from the women in the house.

Check out Chris Rock's take on why heavysset black women are sexy. Watch how he goes into jokes about women's fat ankles. He not only gets away with it, the audience goes wild because of the way he sets it up with an original, intriguing premise:

*"We got a lot of women here tonight. Love the women. You know who my favorite women are? Big, fat, black women. Give me a sister about 350 pounds. The best people in the whole world. You know why?"*

*(Premise) 'Cause we live in a society where nobody likes who the f\*\*k they are. Everybody's on Prozac, or some shit. Everybody's getting cosmetic surgery. Nobody likes who the f\*\*k they are except fat, black women. Fat, black women don't give a f\*\*k what you think. She's going out on Friday night. She got an outfit on. That shit match. She got the pumps on, and the pump fat coming out the pump. That's right. It looks like they baking bread in her shoe.*

*(Act-outs) 'Baby, your foot ready yet? I'll just sprinkle some cinnamon on it.'*

*That's right. She got an anklet on, and that anklet's holding on for dear life.*

*(Tag) Love the women."*

## **10. A good setup has an original premise.**

Your premise can make or break your joke. Let's learn how to create original premises.

### **Setups: The Premise**

The most common reason a joke doesn't get a laugh is because there's no premise or the premise is faulty.

***“So, what, exactly, is a premise?”***

A premise is the following:

- Your opinion.
- Your hit or take on the topic.
- Your insight about a topic.
- A unique or controversial observation.
- Your POV.
- The premise tells the audience the *reason* your topic is hard, weird, scary, or stupid.

It's usually preceded by the word “because...” A (topic) is hard *because...*? How you answer this question creates the premise.

“It's weird how popular Jesus is...Jesus is so popular, because he died at the peak of his career, okay? He was young, he was hot. It would have been different had he lived longer...”

**—Mark Maron**

Maron's topic is “How popular Jesus is.”

Attitude is *weird*.

Then he gives his *opinion* which is that he's popular *because* “*he died at the peak of his career.*”

This is a great premise because it's certainly a unique point of view. And now that he has set up this premise, he flows into a *mix/act-out* by

using this phrase, “What if...”

*“...What if he got old enough to get bitter. What if there’s a third testament to the Bible right at this point—Jesus is in his fifties. He’s got one apostle left. And the book opens with him knee deep in water saying...”*

Now Maron goes into an *act-out* of Jesus as an old guy.

*“‘I used to be able to do this.’ The apostles are saying, ‘Come on, don’t yell at the water. Jesus. Come on in. It’s not your day, buddy. Come on. People are gathering for the wrong reason. Can we just go, please? Please, let’s go to the deli—we’ll have a sandwich. We’ll try again tomorrow. Come on, come on. But yes, you are God.’”*

Teaching premises has always been tough. How do you teach someone to come up with original ideas? How does one come up with premises that are cutting-edge and original? One way is to examine faulty premises.

### ***“What’s a faulty premise?”***

**It’s absent.** Example: *“It’s weird when someone you’ve been dating for one month tells you he loves you. There I was at Starbucks, and this guy I’ve been dating tells me...”* The comic hasn’t said why it’s weird that someone said “I love you.” It’s not because she was at Starbucks. What’s missing is, “because...” and then the premise.

**It’s not insightful.** Example: *“Dating is hard because men and women are different.”* The premise needs to go into more detail and flesh out an original take on dating to make this joke work and not sound hack.

**It doesn’t make sense.** Example: *“Dating is weird because men die sooner.”* Huh? A surefire way to disconnect from an audience is to confuse them.

Say the below examples out loud to understand the wrong way to write a premise versus the right way.

**Wrong Way:**

*“So, while my wife was in the hospital, I got a card from someone who said that laughter was the best medicine. And I was thinking about that and realized yes, laughter does make people feel better, but would I want a doctor or a comic?”*

Wrong! This is a story, and it’s missing both attitude and premise. It’s also in past tense. In stand-up, don’t tell us you “got a card from someone.” We don’t need so much backstory, so cut to the chase.

**Right Way:**

For a good example of the right way to do this joke, learn from Jim Gaffigan. He cuts out the story element, builds an opinion off a popular saying, explains his insightful opinion, and ends with an act-out:

*“They say laughter is the best medicine, and it is...only after you’ve received real medicine, from a real medical professional. Prior to that, you don’t want any laughter. You don’t wanna doctor giggling during an exam, ‘This is your body? Nice man boobs!’”*

***“But, Judy, you say ‘don’t do stories—do premises.’ But, some of the best stand-up comics do stories.”***

Yes, some comics are switching to long form story shows. But they aren’t performing in comedy clubs, but rather in theaters. Many comics will tell a short story *before* getting into the joke. For example, Lewis Black does a little story about listening to the weather, but once he gets into the topic “wind chill,” he throws attitude on it (*stupid*) and gets to an opinion/premise.

*“I was listening to the weather and they started talking about the wind chill factor. They’ve gotta stop reporting wind chill. That’s stupid. It really is. I don’t know where they came up with it, why they came up with it, because it’s a lie. They come on, ‘Well, it’s 27 degrees today, but with the wind chill, it’s minus 3.’ Well, then it’s minus 3, asshole! I don’t need to know what the weather was like if the conditions were perfect!”*

Getting to a premise will help you get more laughs per minute.

*Let’s try writing some premises about a very unfunny topic.*

## **EXERCISE 22: PREMISES—TURNING UNFUNNY TO FUNNY**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 22: Premises—Turning Unfunny to Funny**

#### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

For this exercise let’s use an unfunny topic: Funerals. With your Comedy Buddy, throw out different attitude words and come up with at least three insightful premises for each of our four attitudes.

1. Funerals are *hard* because... (insert premises)
2. Funerals are *weird* because... (insert premises)
3. Funerals are *scary* because... (insert premises)

4. Funerals are *stupid* because... (insert premises)

For example:

**Not insightful:** *“Funerals are weird because your whole family will be there.”*

This doesn’t make sense and it doesn’t answer the question, “Why is it weird that your whole family will be there?” A confused audience is a not-laughing audience.

**Insightful:** *“Funerals are weird because you’re coming to say your final goodbye to someone who can’t hear you.”*

Next, take your most promising funeral premises and drive them to an act-out or a turn. If your premise is solid, the act-out is easy. Put your best jokes in your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder.

*Congratulations. You’ve completed exercises to create a three-to-ten-minute stand-up act. Later in this book there will be more exercises to expand your act to one hour.*

**Reminder.** Are you doing your morning writings? Listening and transcribing your recordings into your **Comedy Bible Workbook**? Checking it off in your calendar? Keep it going—the more you also do the exercises, the more you will find your ability to write jokes improving. Trust the process.

## EXERCISE 23: REWORKING YOUR SETUPS

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > Jokes in Progress by Topic > Reworking My Setups—All Topics

### Comedy Buddy Exercise

Using all you've learned about premises, go back through your material and rewrite the setups of each joke in your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder, making sure your:

- Setups have *attitude*.
- Target *deserves* to be made fun of.
- Setup makes *sense*.
- *Background* information is no more than two sentences prior to getting into the joke.
- Setup contains *present tense* verbs ("There I *am*" rather than "There I *was*").
- Setup is as *short* as possible.
- Setup has a *clear* premise.
- Premise is something the audience hasn't heard before.

When writing premises, don't create just one and then consider yourself done. Write many premises about a topic and when you think you're done, write more. Ask your Comedy Buddy if he or she has heard it before. If so, let go of it—it's hack.

By doing these exercises you are polishing your existing material. Start putting your polished jokes into your "My Act > Polished Jokes by Topic" folder.



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*Now let's move on to what happens after you tell a joke.*

# Tags, Segues, and Getting Laughs In Between Jokes

Now you know how to write jokes:



One more element of the Comedy Structure comes *during* and *after* getting the laugh. It's the *tag*, and it's crucial.

How you react to the audience laughing can be the difference between milking the laugh and killing the laugh. Here's a proven way to capitalize on your best connection points with the audience.

## Tags

After delivering a punchline, there's a lag from the end of the joke to the time the audience laughs. Onstage, that silence feels like an eternity. To end the agony, some comics look down at the floor, avoid eye contact with the audience, or jump right into their next joke. Reacting like this is a *huge* mistake. It not only cuts short the laugh before it has fully developed, but worse yet, it disconnects you from the audience. Resist the fear telling you to end the silence, and instead use *attitude tags*.

## Holding Attitude Through the Joke to the Tag

The attitude of each joke is not just something you say, but *how* you say it and the *mannerisms* you use.

After delivering the joke's payoff, *stay in attitude*—whatever attitude you started the joke with; simply end it with a *repeat* of that attitude. For instance: “*Yep...that's weird...so weird...*” Or, just shake your head: “*Weird...weird.*” It's simple and effective.

One very important element of the tag: *do it while looking at the audience*. Even if fear takes over at this moment, keep your head *up*. Looking down, looking at your setlist, or going into the next joke will kill the connection and kill the laughs. Practice confidence in hanging out there at the end of the joke.

## **Segue to the Next Joke Using Attitude**

The hack way to move to the next joke is by using the topic itself, such as, “*And speaking about failures, my boyfriend was a disaster!*”

Instead of using the topic of your joke, insert an *attitude* word as an intro your next joke. Attitude words make it easy to bounce to any topic or subject matter. For instance, if ending a joke that's an observation about revolving doors, and you want to move on to politics, do it like so: “*Yeah... that's weird about revolving doors...weird...and another thing that's weird...have you seen the news lately?*”

## **Segue to the Next Joke using a Runner**

After doing stand-up for a while, you might find a phrase that you're comfortable repeating. In many cases this phrase becomes your well-known slogan, or as comics call it, a *runner*. Examples:

Joan Rivers – “*Can we talk?*”

Rodney Dangerfield – “*I don't get no respect.*”

Bill Maher – “*I don't know it for a fact, I just know it's true.*”

Dana Carvey (as The Church Lady) – *“Isn’t that special?”*

When a comic does a long form comedy special, their runner is usually the theme of their show, which is typically reflected in the show’s title. For instance, in Wanda Sykes’s “It’s Not Normal” Netflix special, she uses that phrase to tag a joke and start a new one.

*“This shit’s not normal, y’all. It’s not normal. Come on. Here’s another thing that’s not normal. The president...”*

*Let’s practice adding tags and segues to your jokes.*

## EXERCISE 24: ADDING TAGS AND SEGUES

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Jokes in Progress by Topic > Adding Tags

#### Comedy Buddy Exercise

In your *Comedy Bible Workbook*, go to “My Act” folder. Practice delivering each of the jokes to your Comedy Buddy and add a tag at the end of each one, repeating the *attitude* you used in the setup (hard, weird, scary, stupid). Before moving to your next joke using an *attitude segue*, your Comedy Buddy will encourage you to improv new material on the spot. Perhaps another act-out, a turn, a comment—anything we’ve covered so far. You’ll be surprised at the wealth of opportunity for funny stuff living between your jokes. Only after you’ve exhausted all possibilities for more act-outs, another premise, or another turn, use attitude words to segue to the next joke. Push each other further and further, extending those comedy muscles, because that’s what it takes to be a pro.

*If you've been doing the exercises and following directions, you now have enough material to perform at an open mic. Let's get ready to perform.*

# Punch Up! Get Ready to Perform

By this point, you have a lot of material in your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder and hopefully in your “Polished Jokes by Chunks” folder. Some might be fantastic and others might be in need of repair.

In this section we’ll go through your existing material, edit them, punch them up, delete some, and add the winners to your “Polished Jokes by Chunks” folder.

A *chunk* is a collection of jokes on a topic, for example your “*Dating Chunk*,” “*Growing Up Broke Chunk*,” “*Observational Chunk*,” “*Sex Chunk*,” and so on. A professionally written sixty-minute act will usually have three to six chunks, as a pro likes to chew on a topic until there is no meat left on the bones. A five-minute beginner set might have two to four chunks with fewer jokes on each topic as the neophyte comic is trying out new stuff.

*I’m not going to lie to you. This next exercise is going to be hard. It’s always hard to edit your own material. So, get plenty of rest, grab your Comedy Buddy and slowly go through your material following the guidelines in the next exercise.*

## EXERCISE 25: REVIEW AND REWRITE

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## **Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act > Polished Jokes by Chunks**

### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

Go through all the jokes in your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder with your Comedy Buddy. For every joke you like enough to put in your act, put it through the eleven review steps below. This exercise takes time, but think about it—you deserve to feel proud of the work you’ve done up to this point. Enjoy the process of seeing your act start to come together! Some of your jokes will die here, while some will graduate to your “My Act > Polished Jokes by Chunks” folder. Every polished joke must meet all the criteria in this section—no exceptions.

“Write out a favorite joke word for word, one sentence at a time. After completing each sentence, analyze each word. Why does it work? How do the syllables of the words create rhythm? How do the sentences build to the punchline? What’s the grammar of comedy?”  
—Gary Gulman

#### **1. Does your setup joke fairly?**

I know I’ve mentioned this before, but it’s important to repeat: bashing someone who is perceived as being oppressed is not cool. That means LBGTQ, women, people of color, immigrants, etc. Creating original material that doesn’t offend is the sign of a pro. Anyone can shock; few can awe. Having said that, it doesn’t mean we should censor ourselves and stay away from edgy material. If you set up a controversial premise carefully, you can get away with anything.

“Women are bitches.” “Men are dicks.” This is hack.

To be “woke,” look in the mirror, as that is the person and the gender you need to make fun of. Here is a good example of how a male comic, Jim Jeffries, and a female comic, Ali Wong, essentially have the same premise on the same topic of “how women are manipulative about getting a man to propose.”

Notice how Jim Jeffries uses his setup to soften his criticism of women and gets away with it.

*“You ladies are brilliant. You gals are geniuses because you tend to be the ones who want to get married and it’s weird because, somehow, you’ve designed it to where the man asks you. That’s some Jedi-level mind trickery right there. Yes. Well-played. Genius, ladies. Genius. You’re like Yoda, ‘I want to get married, but you’ll ask me.’ Yes. You got it. ‘And you’ll get down on one knee.’ No problem. ‘And you’ll buy me an expensive ring.’ Will do. ‘And whose idea was this?’ All mine. Well-played, ladies. Well-played.”*

Yes! Well played Jeffries. Well played!

Here’s the same premise, but from a woman’s point of view, Ali Wong:

*“It’s so weird as, I had this sneaking suspicion that he was gonna propose...because...I had been pressuring him to do it. That’s how proposals really work, OK? A woman has to incept the idea into the man’s head. First passively and then if he doesn’t get the message, extremely aggressively. You gotta threaten to leave without ever actually leaving because you know that you’re too old and it’s too late to go back out there and find a new man and start the whole manipulation cycle all over again. So, you’re like, ‘I’m just gonna stick with this dude, focus on trapping this dude, and just nag the shit outta him until he becomes weak and caves in and gets fed up.’ It’s like, ‘Shut the fuck up! Fine, will you marry me?’ And then afterwards, the woman is always, like, ‘Oh, my God! He proposed!’”*



So, you can be edgy, controversial and bitchy, if you set up your target with respect.

Don't use humor to oppress others who are already oppressed. Don't punch down. Punch up!

## **2. Does your setup *make sense*?**

A confused audience is a quiet audience. No one bombs harder than a comic whose jokes are obtuse or unclear. Your Comedy Buddy can help you with this. If your buddy tells you he or she doesn't understand the joke, don't argue. Rewrite or drop it. Any joke you have to explain is a bomb waiting to detonate. For your own sake, let it go. With that in mind, do a "logic scan" of your jokes.

## **3. Does your setup have *attitude*?**

If attitude is missing from your joke, put one in. You don't have to necessarily say the words, hard, weird, scary, or stupid, but you must convey the feeling of the attitude throughout each joke. The more blatant your attitude, the more laughs you'll get. Emphasize the attitude in each joke. making sure the attitude you're using holds true from start to finish.

## **4. Is the setup as short as possible?**

One of the main reasons a joke doesn't get a laugh is the setup is too long and/or confusing. Cut all unnecessary words. If it takes you longer than ten seconds to get to a punchline, shorten your setup.

## **5. Is your setup in the present tense?**

Remember, you can always have a short story in past tense to give the audience the necessary info, but once you're into the joke, change all past-

tense verbs to present tense. Example: “*My father is saying...*” rather than, “*My father was saying....*” Even if your joke is about something from the past, you can still use the present tense. For instance, when doing a joke about something that happened when you were ten years old, say, “So I’m ten years old and I see my teacher smoking ...”

## **6. Do any jokes include phrases such as: “How are you doing?” or “True story...”**

If the answer is yes then cut, cut, cut, as it’s hack.

“How are you doing?”—The audience is doing the same as they were for the last six comics who all asked that same stupid question.

“True story...”—So, everything else you’ve joked about is a lie? Keep your credibility intact by never saying that.

## **7. Is any of your material inauthentic?**

Make sure you connect with your material. It needs to be true and have meaning to you so the audience bonds with you. When writing material *just for a laugh*, rather than something you genuinely care about, you’ll sound hack and get nothing but groan-laughes.

## **8. Does the joke include act-outs?**

Is there someone in your setup who you don’t act out? Then add an act-out! Adding act-outs means adding laughs. Even if you’re talking about an inanimate object, a pet, or a part of your body, give it voice by acting it out.

## **9. Does the joke go somewhere unexpected?**

Does your joke have a turn or perhaps a mix? Adding a mix to a joke that’s already working is a smart way to extend the laughs. This is the secret of digging deeper into your topics and getting laughs on a granular level.

## 10. Does the joke have a *clear* premise (stated opinion)?

Each joke must have a premise, *not* a story. When material doesn't get a laugh, chances are it doesn't have a premise, and most often, it's a story.

For instance: *"Relationships are weird because I was involved with this guy for two years and then..."*

Huh? Relationships are weird because you were involved with a guy for two years? That makes zero sense. First tell me *why* relationships are weird, *then* go into the explanation. People love hearing stories. But they *die* in a comedy club setting.

If these words exist in your setup, *"And then I..."* you're telling a story, not doing stand-up. Rewrite!

***"But Judy, I've seen some really hilarious comics who just tell stories."***

***"Steven Wright says, People may think I'm trying something new by telling stories, but they're just jokes connected to give the illusion of stories."***

**—Steven Wright**

Check out their routines again. It may appear they're telling a story, but that's likely not the case at all. If they're performing in a stand-up venue and not on a TED Talk, their material is *premise*-based, *not story*-based. Many comics such as Mike Birbiglia have moved into long form storytelling, performing in theaters rather than comedy clubs. But, if you look at a comic who tells stories, when they get to the funny part, they drop into stand-up structure. Check out Birbiglia's material:

*“I was raised by late people. My parents are laties. When I was a kid, my mom used to pick me up from my swim class at the YMCA, ninety minutes after the class would end. It’s weird because she’s like the cable company. ‘I will pick you up between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.’ I’m a ten-year-old child standing on the street corner in a dripping wet bathing suit and flip-flops. My mom isn’t on the way. She’s at the book club talking about The Color Purple. I’m like, ‘Mom, I am the color purple!’”*

Background information is sometimes necessary, so the audience understands the circumstances of the joke *before the setup*. But once you get into the joke, make sure it fits stand-up structure.

Comedian Kathy Griffin started out playing comedy clubs. She bombed. She was up against comics who were getting laughs every ten seconds, while she was telling stories with longer gaps between the laughs. Frustrated, Griffin started performing in the coffee shop next door to the Hollywood Improv. There and at other storytelling venues, such as The Uncabaret, she developed her own unique style of storytelling comedy. Now, she’s not only a household name, she sells out concert halls worldwide, often performing for three hours at a time. Keep in mind that not all solo comedy performers are stand-ups.

The difference between storytelling and stand-up:

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Stand-Up	Storytelling
Based on your opinion about a topic	A description of a set of sequential events
Rapid-fire setup and payoff	No payoff until the end
Expressed best in the present tense	Told in the past tense
A laugh every ten seconds	A beginning, middle, and end, and takes much longer than ten seconds to tell
Things that did, as well as did not, actually happen	Tied to actual events
Based on a point-of-view (premise)	Driven by the phrase, “And then...”

## 11. Do you like what you’re saying?

Finally, and most importantly, what do *you* think of the joke? You’ll *never* please everyone, but you must please yourself.

Many years ago, a respected talent manager booked me at The Roxy in LA with a great lineup that included the hot comics of that time— Billy Crystal, Lily Tomlin, and others. The day before the gig, he told me that he only booked me because the club owner asked him to, and the owner wouldn’t book the manager’s other clients unless he included me. Then the manager told me how much he disliked my material. Ouch!

So, I took a walk, saying each joke out loud and asking myself, “Do *I* like that joke?” After scrutinizing each joke, some of my material was, truth be told, a bit stale and hack, so I cut it.

I did the gig and killed! The manager changed his opinion and booked me on a ten-city tour. One night over drinks he told me, “By the way, you look exactly like my ex-wife.” He ended up hating me anyway.

Just know, you’ll never please everyone and most of the time you won’t know why.

To recap, run every one of your bits in the “Jokes in Progress” section of your workbook through these eleven qualifiers:

1. Does the target *deserve* to be made fun of?
2. Does your setup make *sense*?
3. Does your setup have *attitude*?
4. Is the setup as *short* as possible?
5. Is your setup in the *present tense*?
6. Do any of your jokes include these words: “How are you doing?”  
“True story...”
7. Is any of your material inauthentic?
8. Does the joke include act-outs?
9. Does the joke go somewhere unexpected?
10. Does the joke have a clear premise (stated opinion)?
11. Do *you* like what you’re saying?

Only those jokes meeting all these criteria deserve to be moved into your “My Act” folder.

*Now, the big question all comics want to know, “What do I open with?”*

# Openings: How to Get an Audience to Love You in Seventeen Seconds

First impressions are lasting impressions. Your opening is *critical* to how your set will go. Studies show when meeting someone for the first time, people form an opinion within 17 seconds. In comedy clubs, you're judged even more quickly—and more harshly. Plenty comics have had hecklers scream, “*You suck!*” as we're merely walking onto the stage.

Your opening needs to establish:

- You're in charge.
- You're likable.
- Your comedy persona.
- Your skill level.
- Your connection with the audience (most important of all).

Let's focus on taking command from the moment you set foot on the stage. In other words, how to be the audience's comedy dominatrix, appearing confident enough for them to surrender to you—so you own them and *make* them laugh!

***“So, what makes a great opening?”***

Every burgeoning comic obsesses over the question, “What should I open with?”

And rightly so.

First, what *not* to do.

## Bad Openings

- Don’t diss the club, the emcee, other comics, or the person signing your check. You won’t be asked back.
- Don’t open with jokes that are political, sexist, homophobic, or racist. Better still, don’t do any material that separates people. Your job as a comic is to bring people together, not divide them.

“Comedy is a tool of togetherness. It’s a way of putting your arm around someone, pointing at something, and saying, ‘Isn’t it funny that we do that?’ It’s a way of reaching out.”

—Kate McKinnon

- Don’t open with something you can’t sustain. The opening has to represent your brand of comedy because it introduces you and gives the audience an idea of what to expect. So, if you open with a crass joke full of F-bombs, and the rest of your act is about being an altar boy, you’ve set a mood, tone, and expectation you didn’t deliver on. And nobody likes that.
- Don’t be too rigid just because you have something planned. Be flexible and spontaneous. The opening that worked last night for your temple group might not play to a younger bar crowd. Be



willing to try something new in reaction to the room and the audience.

## **Six Tips for Improvising Your Opening**

Having a spontaneous opening says to the audience that you are not doing “canned material,” but are fully present. Then...go into your canned material.

### **1. Opening Strong: Get an Immediate Reaction by Pointing Out the Obvious**

In *The Book on Hosting: How Not to Suck as an Emcee*, comic Dan Rosenberg suggests opening your act by getting at least two reactions from the audience. One obvious thing to do is have the audience applaud the emcee. While doing so, get a laugh by pointing out an obvious (and positive) feature about him or her. Then have the audience applaud something obvious about their surroundings, the club, the wait staff, etc.

An emcee with a deep voice once introduced me. Walking onstage, I looked right at him and said: *“Thank you, Tom. That was a great intro. Let’s give him a hand. (Applause) You have a beautiful voice. I realize now it was you who played Darth Vader.”* (Big laugh)

For the second reaction, you can pretty much ask the audience to applaud anything—and they will.

*“And let’s have some applause for the dessert chef, who gave us cake and pie!”*

Remember, people like being in on the joke, so mentioning something obvious and inclusive gets them on your side. A group response (applause) also puts the audience into a state of submission, and it encourages them to put down their drinks and phones.

You don’t have to plan the first thing you’ll say *exactly*. Allow for the spontaneity of what you observe before stepping onstage. It may be scary,

but the audience will respond favorably and it's a great way to start your act.

Examples of who to target for your spontaneous comment:

*“And let's have some applause for...”*

- The guy who just fixed the air conditioning, the clogged toilets, or the mic that was squealing a moment before.
- The guy on the spotlight who passed his drug test and is able to follow me.
- The people here from Canada for *always* being so nice.

Trust me, these all work. Just make sure you're not repeating what another comic has already commented on.

Go to [TheComedyBible.com](http://TheComedyBible.com) to get links of Dan's book and other recommended books.

## **2. Opening Strong: Be Flexible with Your Opening Joke**

After the audience follows your lead and claps for whatever you asked them to, be flexible with your opening joke so you can incorporate something that just happened, or something you know the audience is thinking about.

Once at an open mic in LA, there was a very large drag queen sitting in the front row who was visible to the entire audience. You could see people whispering, “Is that person a woman? A man?” I watched as comic after comic went onstage, ignoring the situation. I went onstage and opened with, “I just want to say you look fabulous!” The entire audience laughed, applauded, and felt relieved. Sometimes you just have to read the audience and refer to what everyone is focused on to create a connection with your audience.

### **3. Opening Strong: Make Your Opening Material About Them**

Know your audience and build a bridge intersecting *your* life with *theirs*. Don't talk about your problems until you connect with the audience by talking about what's bothering them.

For corporate gigs I do preliminary research by calling people and asking, "What's a bad day like for you?" I get loads of material this way, and by opening with something that's specific to them, an immediate connection is made. When doing a gig for a telecom company, an employee said, "With all the construction going on, we don't have parking! I have to park on the street on a meter and move my car every four hours."

I opened with, "*I'm not going to talk very long today as I know that you have to go feed your meters.*" This was received with a roar of laughter and applause. The joke established that I 1) took the time to get to know them, and 2) made my material spontaneous, relevant to them, and not canned.

Another great way to open using material familiar to the audience is to follow the list of three formula: general problem, general problem, their *specific* problem.

For example:

*"There are a lot of serious problems in the world right now, like terrorism (general), climate change (general), and no beer on tap tonight"* (about them).

### **4. Opening Strong: Refer to the Previous Comic, the Emcee, or Who Went Before You**

It's easy and effective to comment on the comic who performed right before you...as long as you don't break the cardinal rule of *never* dissing fellow comics (even if they sucked). You can comment on the topic the comic before you talked about and use it to transition into your material.

For instance, if the comic before ended his set with a chunk on his divorce, you could open with:

*“Yeah, just like Tom said, divorce is scary. Actually, to me divorce would be an achievement because that would mean I actually made it to a second date.”*

And then on to your dating topic.

Another good strategy is to joke about something that just happened. Once at a corporate gig in Modesto, California, I followed a demonstration of the city’s SWAT team. Knowing that we were in an agricultural economy, I opened with, *“Why do you need a SWAT team in Modesto? (act-out) ‘Freeze! Drop those strawberries or I’ll shoot.’”* Huge laugh and I had them at hello.

## **5. Opening Strong: Call the Moment**

Very often, something happens moments before, or even as, you go onstage. If it does, *call the moment*. React to anything that happens, including phones ringing, customers getting up in the middle of your set, fire trucks passing by, and waiters dropping dishes.

Comedian Diane Nichols uses this joke when waiters drop dishes: *“Oh, just put that anywhere.”*

Call the moment for what *isn’t* happening as well. For instance, if your material isn’t getting laughs:

*“Since we’re all observing a moment of silence, I’m going to take this time to pray for the rest of my act.”*

*Call the moment* if anything goes wrong.

For example, if the air conditioning is broken say, *“Isn’t this a great night? For a \$10 cover you get a comedy show and a steam room!”*

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### ***“I know what you’re thinking...”***

Calling out what the audience is thinking is a great way to connect, especially when the topic is something negative. For example, if a joke doesn’t land you can say, *“I know what you’re thinking, ‘She should keep all three of her day jobs.’”*

When I started doing corporate gigs, I was worried I wasn’t qualified to speak in front of upper-management types, since I’ve never had a real job. So, I used this technique and told the audience, *“You’re probably thinking, ‘Why on earth did they hire a stand-up comic? Why couldn’t they hire someone who knows what they’re talking about, like a government consultant?’”* Big laugh and even better, by speaking the concern, it went away.

If being spontaneous is *not* your thing, you can get a laugh at your opening by reacting to how you were introduced. I remember Bob Nichman being introduced as a comic who has done a lot of TV work. He opened with, *“That’s right! I’ve been in LA for six years and I’ve already got a series—a series of disappointments.”*

## **6. Opening Strong: Call Out Something Everyone Can See**

The secret to a killer opening for almost any audience is joking about something everyone can *see*—the stage, the lights, or better yet, you.

Once at a Toastmasters meeting, which is an international public speaking organization, the only decorations were three balloons. I said

sarcastically, *“Wow! Look at the fancy stage decorations. Toastmasters definitely needs more gay men.”* Hmm...not sure if that joke was “woke,” but as the author of *The Homo Handbook*, I’ve got more leeway than most straight comics.

Or, joke with something visually obvious about you. Louis Anderson, who is a large comic, had a killer opening line, *“Can you all see me from behind this mic stand?”*

Diane Kawasaki, who’s an Asian little person, plays off the audience’s assumed judgment about her being less than three feet tall. She comes onstage saying, *“I know you’re looking at me and thinking...the correct phrase is Asian-American.”*

An exercise on self-mocking might also lead to a great opening. That will be later in this book.

*Let’s now work on what you are going to open with.*

## EXERCISE 26: CREATING A KILLER OPENING

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 26: My Opening**

**Comedy Buddy Exercise**

### **Pick an Opening Joke**

Following the guidelines in the last section, go through all your jokes in “My Act” and “Jokes in Progress” and, hell, look through your morning

pages and your voice transcriptions to pick a few jokes to use as your opening. If you're unsure, that's OK, just chose a few to use as placeholders. It will probably change as you keep working through this book.

## **Creating an Authentic Opening**

There are comics who stick to a preplanned opening. Mark Miller always opened with this killer line, "*Do you love me yet?*" But in this age, audiences crave authenticity and realness. You can't plan spontaneity, but you can practice improv techniques with your Comedy Buddy.

### **Standing in front of your Comedy Buddy, try these exercises:**

1. Pick out a few jokes that you think would be good openers. It should be a joke that sets the tone for your act. One that you can sustain. It could be a joke about yourself or about the audience.
2. Practice getting the audience to applaud two obvious things. Then practice sliding into your opening joke in an organic way.
3. Next, have your Comedy Buddy shout out some situations as you walk on the stage and react in the moment. For example:
  - A phone starts ringing.
  - The comic before trashed women and you're a woman.
  - A waiter drops glasses.
  - The entire front row gets up and leaves.
  - The club is excessively warm.

- There is a bachelorette party.
  - The emcee messes up your name.
4. After improvising a reaction, practice going into your first joke. If the transition doesn't feel natural, then try out different jokes to open with.

It takes a lot of stage time to get the chops to trust your comedy instincts on how to open. But meanwhile you have a leg up by practicing different ways to open for different audiences and situations. Later, I'll show you some exercises that will also give you more possibilities as openers. But, at least have a few ideas written down in the Set List Section of your *Comedy Bible Workbook*.

*Now, let's figure out your closing.*



# Closing Strong Using Callbacks

I'm sure you've heard the saying, "Leave them laughing." Your closing is usually your funniest material and often, your most sexual material. So, if you do have sexual material, save it for last. For you church comics, this doesn't apply.

You want a surefire laugh at the end of your set and one way to get that is using callbacks.

## ***"What exactly is a callback?"***

A joke referring to a topic, a punchline, or a phrase from a joke you told earlier in the act is a *callback*. The second joke uses the same word or phrase from the first joke, but in a *different context*. A pro tip for getting a *huge laugh* at the end of your set, where the audience is yelling for more when you leave the stage, is to use a callback as your close.

Callbacks have helped me get a laugh when a joke bombs by referring to a joke I did earlier in the set.

So, earlier in the set, I did this joke, *"It's weird how nobody in Los Angeles laughs any more... Because they can't. Too much Botox. I'm doing a joke and the audience is going, (act-out of someone with a frozen face) 'You're soooooo funny! Look at me. I'm laughing so hard.'"*

Then, later in the show when a joke didn't work, I said, *"I see you've all had Botox."* It's now the callback that gets the laugh and saves me.

A callback makes the audience feel they're sharing an inside joke with you. For example, in riffing with the audience, you might find out a woman

in the front row just got a divorce, and her name is Debby. Then, later in your act, when you're doing material about "women whose men run off on them and they end up drunk and alone," you add, "You relate, right Debby?" Big laugh. You're all in on the same "private" joke.

So, dropping a callback in the end of your set is a very satisfying way to get a laugh and wrap it all up.

*Let's see if you have some callbacks hiding in your "Jokes in Progress by Topic" folder to use for your closer.*

## **EXERCISE 27: ADDING CALLBACKS TO CLOSE STRONG**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 27: Adding Callbacks**

#### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

Take a look at the material in your *Comedy Bible Workbook*. Which jokes would you like to open with, or definitely include in the first few minutes of your set? What word, phrase, or theme do you see that would be fun to repeat later or at the end of your set? Run through some callback ideas with your Comedy Buddy.

Example: You're doing material early in your act about how weird your brother is for cuddling with his cat when he sleeps. Then you end your set with, "*Thank you. I've got to go. I promised my cat I'd be home early to cuddle.*"

Some of the best callbacks are those you think of in the moment. When performing, stay open to all possibilities.

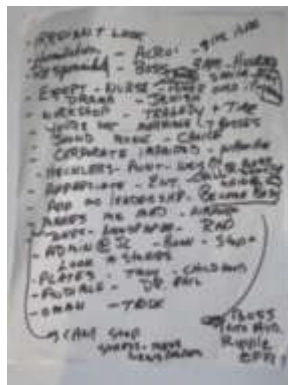
*Meanwhile, it's time to write the set list for your gig. You know...the gig that's on your calendar. Right? Right?*

# Overcome Stage Fright by Creating a Set List

ne of the biggest fears for beginning comics is forgetting their act. Let's eliminate that worry by focusing on how to write a set list.

A set list is *not* a script—it's a *cheat sheet*. You're going to write a list of words or short phrases to jog your memory on what joke comes next. This allows you to be fully present and removes the worry associated with forgetting your act.

Here is my set list for a sixty-minute act. I write it with a Sharpie pen so I can see it and put it on a high stool next to a glass of water. That way, I can glance at it and know where I'm going if I'm lost while I take a sip of water.



Before writing a set list, here are some pointers to help with determining the best order for your material.

When you're a new comic, it helps to think of the audience as a first date. You want to start off with stuff you have in common, such as living in the same city, sharing a similar heritage, or common interests. As the audience gets more comfortable with you, it's easier to reveal more personal or edgy information. But just like a first date, it might be off-putting if the first thing the audience learns pertains to your menstrual cycle or your latest herpes episode. Remember, very often, the audience is eating nachos, so make them laugh—not nauseous.

Arrange your material the way your body is arranged. Start with your head—do smart stuff about community, family, ethics, heritage, simple observations about life. Then, work your way down to your heart—emotional material about love, heartaches, breakups, and marriage. And end at the groin—sexual material.

The problem with starting with sexual material is it gives you no place to go. So just like a good date, let the audience get to know you before metaphorically undressing in front of them. Or, you could simply choose to keep all of your material “above the waist.”

*Have a fun jam session with your Comedy Buddy in this next exercise.*

## **EXERCISE 28: GET ON YOUR FEET— SET LIST FUN**

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercise> Exercise 28: Set List Fun**

**Comedy Buddy Exercise**

Let's practice being loose with an exercise many comedy clubs do as a show called "Set List—Comedy Without a Net." When pro comics hit the stage, they're given a set list and must improvise material on the spot using the topics given to them. Let's try it.

We'll start by listing the topics. With your Comedy Buddy, get on your feet and use the joke structure outlined in your *Comedy Bible Workbook* under "My Act > Joke Structure."

Below is a *sample set list*. Attack these topics with *attitude*. Then drive them to a *premise* (opinion or insight) and get to an *act-out* or a *turn*.

Talk about *why* these topics are hard, weird, scary, or stupid:

- Shopping when you're broke.
- Picking a tattoo.
- Women's tennis.
- Celebrity weddings.
- Dating when you're older.
- College cafeteria food.
- Living in a dorm.
- Eating vegan with friends who are meat eaters.
- Being sober when your friends are drunk.
- Donut holes.
- Holidays with your family.
- Dog sleeping in your bed.
- Life coaches.

When you are being loose, you might find that you are creating some killer bits in the moment. For that reason, record your sessions and, as

always, capture your favorite responses and put them in your *Comedy Bible Workbook*.

## EXERCISE 29: ORGANIZING YOUR SET LIST

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act > Set Lists**

### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

**Now let's organize your polished jokes into a set.**

1. **Create code words.** Go through all your polished joke documents and, for each joke, write in all caps a code word or short phrase at the beginning of that joke. For instance, the routine about going with your grandmother to buy cannabis can be shortened to: “G-MA POT.”
2. **Organize your set list(s).** Remember: Think of the audience as a first date. Start off with stuff you have in common, such as working in an office, driving, or shopping online. When the audience gets more comfortable with your material, you can introduce more personal or edgy information.
3. **Edit your set list(s).** Edit according to how much time you'll be onstage as well as the venue.

**Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act > Set Lists > My Three-Minute Clean Act**

So, you might end up with:

NERD

GROWING UP MORMON

NEW PUPPY

BROKE

GETTING DUMPED

### **Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act > Set Lists > Raunchy Ten Minutes**

A typical set list might look like this:

I'M TALL

STUPID THINGS PEOPLE SAY

BEING BROKE

POLITICS

CAN'T GET LAID

FOOD IN BED

SEX TOYS

If you take your set list onstage, put it on a stool next to you and only look at it *after* you get a laugh, and then *after* you do the *tag*. When looking down at the set list *during* the laugh, you'll cut it short. It's critical to be *in the moment* with the audience when they're laughing. Some comics put a drink next to their set list as an excuse to look down.

**To Bring, or Not to Bring, Your Set List Onstage**



Many famous comics bring their set list onstage in order to hone jokes they've either written that day or are *workshopping*. But you'll hardly ever see a comic refer to a set list for a paying gig. A visible set list undercuts the illusion the comic is being funny in the moment. A piece of paper communicates to the audience that what they're watching is preplanned. So, take a leap of faith and leave your set list in the car. After all, if you forget your scripted jokes, maybe the jokes you think of on the spot will be *funnier*.

4. **Know with certainty what your last bit is and its length.** You might be in the middle of your set when the light indicating *one minute remaining* goes on. So, if your last bit is thirty seconds, you'll want to perfect transitioning to it from anywhere in your set. Practice going from the middle of your act to the last bit. This technique will prove to be indispensable throughout your career for finishing on time.

*Practice your act using a set list until you feel you know it. Consider not bringing your set list onstage. Let's work on how to memorize your act as forgetting material is one of a comic's biggest fears.*

# How to Memorize Your Act and Not Sound Like You've Memorized Your Act

*“I’m totally freaked out that I’m going to forget all my jokes!”*

Memorizing a stand-up routine is very different from memorizing a speech. You don’t want to sound like a robo-comic onstage. That said, some jokes depend on very specific verbiage, whereas act-outs can generally be loose and spontaneous. Here are some suggestions.

## EXERCISE 30: HOW TO MEMORIZE YOUR ACT

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### Take Your Chunks Out for a Walk

Take your material out for a walk—one chunk at a time. Doing a repetitive exercise such as walking or even throwing a ball against a wall is effective for connecting your material to muscle memory.

So, first read through a chunk of your material. If you’re writing a three-minute set, this could be a one-minute chunk. Leaving your material behind, take your phone to record yourself as you go for a *walk and talk*. As you walk, say your material out loud with attitude as you visualize an audience in front of you. After each joke, look up and nod to your

imaginary audience creating a *tag* that gives them a chance to laugh. You won't look weird to people passing by as they will assume you are on your phone having a fight with someone.

If you forget material, just improvise. If you come up with more material, record it. Now, go home and match up what you did with what you wrote. Chances are, the way you spoke the material while walking is the way it *needs to be done*. If you forgot material, perhaps there's a good reason for leaving it out. That material might be awkward or inauthentic. Go out for another walk, and if you forget that bit again, trust your instincts and cut it.

After finishing the first chunk, go on to the next one. Bonus: By the end of this exercise, not only have you memorized your act, but you got some cardio in.

**Warning! Do not practice your jokes on friends.**

One former student had a great act, then he tried his material out on friends. They didn't like it and gave him suggestions. At our class showcase he performed nasty jokes about "blue balls" and totally bombed. Stand-up is not the same thing as telling jokes at a party. Practice with, and trust, your Comedy Buddy.

## Memorize by Place

A super effective mnemonic device is delivering various parts of your speech in different physical places. For instance, you can do the chunk about your parents at the mic. Then take the mic out, move to stage left, and do the chunk about your last breakup. Associating a chunk with a specific location helps you remember material.

John Kinde, a professional speaker and humorist, suggested finding a balance between memorizing your act and being impromptu: ***“Certain parts of the act should be precisely memorized. Try to deliver these parts exactly the same way each time. But don’t freeze if you deviate a bit. You don’t want to be a prisoner of a script.”***

But there are a few specific elements you absolutely must memorize:

**The first sentence of each chunk of your act.** Even if you blank for a second, the segue to another chunk will come to you.

**The last joke.** You don’t ever want to stumble over your closing!

## **The Benefits of Memorizing**

***“Judy, I don’t want to memorize an act as the best stand-up comics appear as if they’re being funny off the top of their heads.”***

Long ago, I did an HBO Comedy Special with several newcomers including Robin Williams. During the rehearsal, Williams was very clear on what he was doing and where he was doing it as he said to the director, “Then I’ll walk into the audience and do my Shakespeare routine here.”

Certainly, Williams improvised a lot of material on the spot. But his brilliance was making his planned material look spontaneous.

It's impossible to become a professional until a memorized, rehearsed act sounds spontaneous and natural, leaving room to react in the moment to your audience.

Memorizing your act allows your personality to shine through and provides the confidence to be spontaneous. Certain parts of your act need to be really tight and scripted, like each of your setups. But leave room to improvise and even surprise yourself during act-outs. You'll even want to leave spots open where you might banter with the audience.

"It will never be perfect, but perfect is overrated.  
Perfect is boring!

Say 'Yes' and you'll figure it out later."

—Tina Fey

***Do not*** practice your act in front of a mirror. News flash: In the club, there will be no mirror. The only thing practicing your act in front of a mirror will do is make you more self-conscious. It's best to practice while ***visualizing*** an audience, rather than looking at yourself. I also suggest ***not*** videotaping yourself without an audience. If you really want to have the experience of being onstage, turn off all the lights and set up a flashlight to shine in your eyes. That's what it's

like being onstage—and you'll also be prepared the next time you're pulled over for a DUI.

*“It would be far less stressful if I could just read my material.”*

In order to make people laugh, you have to connect with them. That will never happen with your head down, reading from a piece of paper. Ever.

*Memorizing your act verbatim may have gotten you an A in high school, but it's not the most important criteria of being a successful comic. It's not about the words—it's about the emotion behind what you're talking about, and letting your persona come through. Speaking about your persona...*

# Your Comedy Persona

## ***“What exactly is a comedy persona?”***

Your comedy persona is being your most authentic self onstage. It's the *way* you tell your jokes. After all, everyone talks about basically the same topics: relationships, observations, their job, and so on. But nobody covers those topics the way *you* do. Nobody else has your particular POV, your voice, or your mannerisms. All these elements form your comedy persona.

We haven't discussed comedy persona until now as it usually takes years to form. Comedy persona develops organically, like when you're practicing in front of your Comedy Buddy.

Think about some of your favorite comedians and you'll immediately recognize their personas. Sarah Silverman is cutting and smart. Chris Rock is high-energy, and tells the truth with no apologies. Amy Schumer is adorable and oversexed. But that's not how they started out. The road to being fully authentic onstage is a long journey. Your persona will be a combination of *what* you talk about and *how* you talk about it.

## ***“What if I want to be a character onstage?”***

One of the biggest mistakes beginners make is going onstage as a *character*. Many comics don a facade out of fear of being vulnerable in front of an audience. Or, they fear being boring, so they develop a funny character. The problem is, that effort goes against the core of what makes

stand-up entertaining—the authenticity and relatability of the material. Your persona is (or will be) *you*.

Comedy persona is beyond the topics you talk about. For instance, throughout my career I've joked about a lot of different topics, often based on my current life stage. Starting out in my twenties, much of my early material included jokes about and act-outs of my Russian-American Jewish grandmother, feminism, and dating. I didn't start out doing material about aging, but, guess what? My audience has aged along with me, so it's become a big part of my current act. What's been consistent throughout my career, no matter *what* I joke about, is my personality and the *way* I perform. I would say my current comedy persona is being a reluctant rabble-rouser.

Some beginners try to identify their comedy persona *before* they've written any jokes. They want to be a “Trevor Noah type” or a “Tina Fey type.” What about being a *you* type? After all, that type hasn't been done yet.

Your topics—what you're passionate about, what really gets under your skin, what you can't stop thinking about, and the way you talk about things while being true to yourself—define your persona. What do *you* want to talk about? What do *you* have to say?

Let your comedy persona develop organically. Many well-known comics feel the audience's perception of them created their persona. Be patient. See what develops.



“Whatever a comic talks about onstage is all they talk about offstage.”

—Sarah Silverman

Use this time in your early career to explore topics that interest you, and play around with various delivery styles. The audience will identify your persona when they connect to an authentic and hilarious vibe in your set. Don't put the persona before the material and, most importantly, don't worry about branding yourself until you have a solid thirty-minute set.

## Stay Authentic to Yourself

When Jerry Seinfeld started out, he did any gigs he could to try out material. One night, Seinfeld was headlining and the middle comic, or “middler,” was nonstop nasty. Every topic was something you'd never discuss in front of your grandmother: masturbation, orgasm, sperm, breasts, just to name a few. And the scary part was, the drunken audience loved it. Then Seinfeld walked onstage with his observations, “*Where does lint come from?*” At first the audience was dead. But Seinfeld didn't change what he did. He kept on with his clean material, and slowly but surely the audience started laughing, and laughing hard. Seinfeld always kept authentic to himself no matter who he followed.

## Dressing for Your Persona

In the last exercise you looked at some of your personality attributes, now let's combine those with what you're going to *look like* onstage.

Obviously, your wardrobe is the first thing people see (and judge you on) when you come onstage. It tells the audience who you are before you say one word. In her first HBO special, which launched her to stardom, Rita

Rudner came onstage in a super-cute cocktail dress and full makeup, telegraphing, “I’m cute, smart, and I don’t swear.” That became her persona.

John Mulaney is usually in a suit and tie as if to say, “I’m a pro and dress like one.”

Then again, Michael Rappaport wears a hoodie as if to say, “I just got out of bed and I’m here riffing on stuff.”

Janeane Garofalo dresses down in something most women would wear to the gym. The grunge look compliments her “I-don’t-give-a-shit” persona.

Paula Poundstone wears a coat and tie, only revealing her from the neck up, conveying, “I’m doing smart, heady comedy.”

Until deciding what to wear, follow these fashion don’ts:

**No clothing with writing on it—especially jokes.** If your clothes are funnier than you, that’s a problem. Branded gear is also distracting. You never know what experiences an audience member has had with Nike, so why risk it?

**Women, keep away from sexy outfits.** Turn the audience on with your *mind*. Men can generally get away with being both sexy and funny.

**Don’t wear anything that makes you uncomfortable.** If you’re performing in a comedy club with hay and peanut shells on the floor, don’t show up in a three-piece Versace suit. Lose the tie and vest, at least. Your formality should match that of the club.

**No one likes a sleaze ball, so don’t dress like one.** Don’t wear stained and wrinkled clothes. Look clean, even if your act isn’t.

## **Special Note to Female Comics: Sexism in Comedy**

“I have a suspicion that the definition of crazy in show business is a woman who keeps talking

even after no one wants to f\*\*k her anymore.

**—Tina Fey**

We've come a long way from my first appearance on a TV comedy special when the emcee introduced me with this not-so-appropriate-bytoday's-standards announcement, "Here's something different—a girl comedian. And she has tits!" No joke. Twenty years ago, most comedy clubs just had lineups of mostly all male comics. Now, comedy clubs just have lineups of...mostly all male comics. It gets bleaker for older female comics. After all, when was the last time you heard a good menopause joke on late night TV? ...ah, never?

“Stand-up comedy is not a man's job. It's an alpha job: To be the only person in a room with a microphone who's allowed to talk.

**—Katherine Ryan**

It's the same struggle that has gone on for decades—how do we women assume a power position and be taken seriously for our *ideas*, rather than our *bodies*? For the first ten years of my career, I wore pants. I remember the first time I got up the courage to wear a dress onstage at a comedy club. When I walked out, I got cat-calls. But, by this point in my career, I was confident enough to own it. I squashed the heckler and established myself as the one in control. Women comics need to take the risk of not being desirable—of having strong opinions, turning people off, being appreciated from their neck up. That's the freedom that white male comics have always enjoyed.

This topic is much bigger than a notation at the end of a chapter, so I'm currently writing an entire book on how female comedians can market themselves and make just as much money as men. Stay tuned.

*The next exercise gives you an idea of what your persona might become.*

## **EXERCISE 31: EXPLORING YOUR COMEDY PERSONA**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 31: Exploring My Comedy Persona**

Let's get in touch with what makes you unique and learn how to expand on your distinctive characteristics.

#### **1. Pick two or three of these describing you:**

- Mom-type
- Optimistic
- Sarcastic
- Angry
- Shy
- Political
- Dark

- Rebel
- Awkward
- Blunt
- Cheerleader
- Shy
- Nerd
- Loser
- Slacker
- Brown-noser
- Vulnerable
- Sexually obsessed
- Cutting-edge
- Neurotic
- Geek
- Lazy
- Indecisive
- Prankster

 I guess I just prefer to see the dark side of things.  
The glass is always half-empty...and cracked.  
And I just cut my lip on it. And chipped a tooth.

**—Janeane Garofalo**

**2. Use these two or three characteristics from above to write new material.**

Ask yourself what's been hard/weird/scary/stupid about being (*insert your quality*).

Write some new material for these qualities in your "Exercise 31: Exploring My Comedy Persona" document. If nothing comes up, try a different attribute and/or attitude. Transfer any strong material to your *Comedy Bible Workbook*.

**3. Look in your closet and what outfit reflects your persona?**

*You now have an act with polished jokes. Let's talk about performing it!*

# Performing Stand-Up: Essential Pro Tips

## Mic Technique: “Is This Thing On?”

Stand-up should *never* be performed without a microphone. Even in a room with two people. An important part of what makes stand-up work is you’re *louder* than everyone else. You can have the funniest act in the world, but if people can’t hear you, cue the crickets.

The first thing to do when you get onstage is adjust the mic stand. However, nothing says *amateur* like fumbling with the mic, so practice this! From Canada to Cambodia, every mic stand in the world works the same way.

Repeat this now: “Righty tighty, lefty loosey.”

Walk out, grab the stand, loosen it (by twisting “lefty loosey”), then bring the mic slightly below your mouth and tighten the stand (by twisting “righty tighty”). Then, tilt the mic slightly toward you so it’s directly in front of your mouth.

## ***“Should I take the mic out or leave it in the stand?”***

If you’re a beginning comic, leave the mic in the stand. The advantages of this are:

- It centers you and prevents pacing.
- It frees up both hands for act-outs.

- It's one less thing for you to worry about.

Watching amateur comics pace back and forth is like watching a tennis match—it's dizzying. Many comics do it because they think it looks like they have a lot of energy. In reality, pacing makes you seem nervous and diffident.

**Warning:** Try not to use a lavalier, which is a mic that attaches to your clothing and placed near your mouth. Lavs work great for presentations, and when doing a lot of physicality and act-outs. But they can be disastrous for comics. Why? During some act-outs you'll need to raise your voice, or even shout. To prevent blowing out people's eardrums, you must control amplification by moving away from the mic when yelling. You can't do that with a lav.

You also need a handheld mic for audience participation. If the space is conducive to it, ask a question and then hold the mic out for an audience member to speak into. Just make sure the mic never leaves *your* hand!

Finally, the mic stand can become a character or be used as a prop. Just don't use it as a metal detector or a penis, as this has been done to death.

## Using the Mic

No mic and stand at home? Get to the club early and practice. Rehearsing with the stand gives you confidence and, again, it's one less thing to worry about when you're in front of a live audience.



## **Pro tip**

Pawn shops and thrift stores are full of mic stands previously belonging to hopeful musicians.

How to use the mic:

1. First, decide which portions of your act you'll do with the mic in the stand, and when (or if) you're going to pull it out.
2. Practice pulling the mic out of the stand. Hold the mic in one hand and put the stand behind you without taking your eyes off the audience. If your attention and focus go to the mic, you'll lose their attention.
3. Determine at which points you're going to need both hands for an act-out. Practice smoothly putting the mic back in the stand just before your act-out. Keep your head up and your eyes on the audience while putting the mic in the stand.

*Now let's go over bantering with the audience.*

# Crowd Work

Inserting space in your act to banter with the audience is a great way to connect with them. In most cases, audiences want and expect to be a part of the show, so be comfortable including them. And it's often an organic way to introduce a topic that segues into your preplanned material. But it's critical to *engage* the audience without losing control of your show.

Crowd work is an art form in itself, as evidenced by some of the greats like Jimmie Brogan, Todd Barry, and Dean Lewis, who lists the dos and don'ts of audience participation as follows:

## **Here are some tips on crowd work from comic Dean Lewis:**

### **1. Go from a Group, to a Table, to a Person**

Audience members can be reluctant to talk. So, ask a question or make a statement the whole audience can react to. Then look for a group that's responsive, and finally, address one person in the group. This works because it:

- Immediately gets the whole room involved.
- Lets audience members enjoy seeing their friends on the spot.
- Can result in multiple people joining in on the fun.

Example: *"This is going to be the best year ever for football. Wow, you all seem motivated. You, sir, who are you rooting for this year?" 'The XX?'*

*My team is XX.*” And then go into your preplanned material on football.

## **2. Include Local Flavor**

- Before going onstage, research any *shared experiences* for this show’s audience—e.g., lousy traffic, bad weather, a local or big news story (that’s *not* tragic or political), a fad, a neighborhood tradition, etc. Weave the most universal experiences into your act for that night.
- Are there are any groups in the audience, such as bachelorette parties, birthday parties, tour groups, or company parties? Groups can sometimes be loud and obnoxious, so a smart approach is to talk about *not* being in that group. Example: “*There’s a bachelorette party here tonight.*” (They hoot and holler.) “*Hope you all have a good time, and let’s give some love to the real heroes here tonight—those who have to sit next to them.*” Act out someone sitting with folded arms and a bitter look on their face, then add “*Bachelorette party...whoop it up girls! Because Lord knows it gets soooo much better after the first twenty years.*”

## **3. Use Agreement when Interacting with Audience Members**

A well-known improv technique is when none of the performers can say “No;” they can only say, “Yes, and...”

Instead of putting down anyone’s response, agree and then build on it.

- Build on what the audience member says.
- *Never* engage in any arguments.

**Doing “Yes, And...” With Hecklers**

One time an audience member called me a bitch. So, I said, “Yes, *and* that means, (counting out each word on a finger) I’m a B-I-T-C-H. That means I’m a ‘Babe In Total Control of Herself’!” It got such a huge laugh I ended up making t-shirts with that phrase.

#### **4. Always Use Open-Ended Questions**

Avoid asking closed-ended questions, which can be answered with a yes or no. Those are boring and don’t extend the conversation. Ask questions requiring a fill-in-the-blank response, and include personal feelings, opinions, or ideas. This technique provides more material to work with and provides more room to insert jokes you’ve already written.

For example:

Close-ended: “Are you two married?”

Open-ended: “No rings. Why aren’t you two married?”

#### **5. Always Be Polite and Approachable**

If you’re a jerk to audience members, no one will talk to you. Even worse, the audience will side with anyone you insult and turn *against* you. Nothing kills a performance faster than a crowd turning on you. Address people with respect and offer praise instead of criticism.

- Nobody likes an asshole.
- Audiences must feel comfortable interacting with you.
- Being polite makes the room more relaxed.

#### **6. Make Yourself the Target**

Self-deprecation is a no-fail. Use it to joke about your character defects—the audience laughs hardest when they identify with your issues.

It's better to pick on yourself rather than audience members.

## **7. Ask a Question to Get into Your Material**

To make your material more organic, start off with a question. Let's say you're going to joke about your divorce. Ask a couple who looks affectionate how long they've been together. You can use what they say as a setup for going into your material. *"Yeah, I used to be as in love as you. Getting a divorce is scary...I know."* And then on to your material about your failed marriage.

- A question can create an easy segue.
- A question makes the act seem more spontaneous.

## **8. Give Recognition to Those Who Deserve It**

If an audience member makes a comment that gets a big laugh, celebrate it! They're doing the work and you're still getting paid. Give them a moment to enjoy it.

- If someone deserves applause, let them have it.
- Recognition gets people excited and engaged.

## **9. Use the Setting**

Watch the audience before your performance and see what they're dealing with. Is there a stain on the curtain behind you? Was parking a nightmare? Dropping observational tidbits into your act is extremely effective in connecting with your audience.

- Shared experiences are relatable for *everyone* there.
- Observations make people think you're quick on your feet.

## 10. Build Off the Previous Performer (But Don't Be a Hack!)

Just as you can comment on shared experiences about the city, neighborhood, or venue you're in, you can also comment on the performers who appeared before you. I watched a show where comic-actor Michael Rappaport, using a high energy delivery, talked about being Jewish. Marc Maron came on afterward, slowly pulled up a stool, eased himself down and said, *"Now, for the low energy Jewish section of the show. You're getting both ends of the Jewish spectrum tonight."* Huge laugh as everyone knew it was a true spontaneous moment.

- Building off someone else's act keeps positive momentum in the room.
- Always be kind, especially to fellow comedians.
- If the comic before you bombs, *never* put him or her down.

## Secrets for Overcoming the Fear of Spontaneity

**No one knows if you fail.** The audience has no idea you're trying to create a spontaneous moment unless you tell them. If you engage a person with a question or statement and it goes nowhere, just *move on*. The moment will be quickly forgotten unless *you* dwell on it. You only get better at talking to audiences by talking to audiences. The biggest skill to master is learning how to quickly move on after hitting a dead end.

**Audiences are predictable.** You'll definitely see patterns in people's responses after just a few shows. Whenever I ask a husband what the secret is to a long marriage, the answer's always, "I say, 'Yes dear' a lot" or "I married my best friend." At corporate events, food stealing by coworkers or microwaving something that stinks up the break room are topics that come

up a lot. Developing go-to responses to these types of predictable answers works well, so make sure you have a few. And similar to a knock-knock joke, you can actually setup audience members so you can deliver a prescribed response.

**Have a plan.** Instead of jumping in with no sense of direction, ask leading questions that deliver snappy comebacks you already have. The more you do this, the more laughs you'll get.

**Perfection is not the goal.** Be okay with not having a perfect riff. It's a huge step just talking to the audience and engaging them. Give yourself credit for each small step you take and keep sight of the long-range goal—getting comfortable with spontaneity.

**If you can't be funny, be friendly.** If you *can* connect with the audience, you've accomplished the hardest part. Sometimes, just being friendly and likeable is as good as being hilarious. Likeability = More Work.

*The biggest secret to connecting with the audience is to be an active listener. Relax, breathe, and listen. You can totally do this. As a matter of fact, let's commit to leaving room for spontaneity the next time you perform.*

## EXERCISE 32: CROWD WORKING AN AUDIENCE

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act > Set List

After studying the various techniques on audience participation, mark a place in your set list where you'll commit to improvising with the audience the next time you perform.

First, determine if this particular audience is open to participating. Audiences form a personality, and some audiences, just like first dates, do *not* want to get involved.

Have strong material to go into *after* you improvise.

If you still feel uncomfortable winging it, take an improv class to practice “Yes, and...” techniques, or join a Toastmasters group which is another great way to learn improv.

*Now let's move on to handling audience members who get too involved: hecklers.*



# Crushing Hecklers Without Ruining the Show

*“What if I have hecklers?”*

Fact: Most novice comics are afraid of hecklers. They imagine a drunken stranger just waiting to humiliate them as they freeze onstage. The truth is, this rarely happens. Most audiences are too shy to speak up when asked a simple question, let alone shout insults at the comic. During the few times people have tried this while I was onstage, I’ve actually found it fun to take a break from doing my material and start riffing with them. When someone starts heckling, I say to myself, “Bring it on! I smell fresh meat.”

“You’ve got to be stupid to heckle me—I am very equipped to win.

**—Lewis Black**

Why you shouldn’t be afraid of hecklers:

- You’ve got a mic and are louder than they are.
- They’re drunk and (hopefully) you’re not.
- You (should) have the audience on your side.

## Three Best Ways to Handle Hecklers

Here are three approaches to dealing with hecklers:

1. Ad-lib a solution in the moment.
2. Have a few heckler-controlling, preplanned responses.
3. Get them kicked out—but *only* if they're disruptive and annoying the rest of the room.

“Every heckler is unique because they say something, and you react to what they say or what they're wearing or who they're with, so every response to a heckle is unique.”

—Sebastian Maniscalco

When a heckler's intent is ruining your show, signal the manager to throw them out. They understand it's not good business if one person ruins the show for everyone.

## Ad-Libbing with Hecklers: Rules of Play

When a comic improvises a zinger on a heckler, it creates excitement. With one well-placed hit of wit—*bam!*—they're squashed. Nothing feels better than that. On the other hand, if you hit them *too hard*, the audience can turn on you. Just ask Michael Richards, aka Kramer on *Seinfeld*, after a racist rant toward a heckler went viral. Here are some rules on how to handle hecklers from comic and stand-up coach, Dean Lewis.

### Heckler Rule #1: You Can Ignore Hecklers

Sometimes heckling can get out of hand, and if a comic responds to every single thing an audience member says it can be irritating. You have a choice to ignore a heckler. Sometimes a heckler just wants attention, and one outburst is enough.

“Let’s say there was a fat guy heckling me. I would rip him to shreds, but I would never go for the obvious, never talk about how he’s fat or anything.

—Judah Friedlander

## **Heckler Rule #2: Never Hit a Heckler Harder Than They Hit You**

For example, if a heckler comments on your hair, snap back with something about their hair (or lack thereof). If they disparage your outfit and you dial up your response by insulting their mother, you may shut them up, but you’ll come off as a bully. This alienates the audience.

“I love hecklers. They remind you that you are a comedian.

—Dane Cook

## **Heckler Rule #3: Distinguish Between a Heckler and Somebody Who’s Just Having a Good Time**

Some people will respond to your material by laughing and talking back to you. They’ll say things like “I heard that,” or “That’s right!” and so on. These are not hecklers. Calling them out is a mistake. The verbal

audience member doesn't realize they're a pest. If you make a big deal out of it, two things are likely to happen:

- The outspoken party will feel you made them look foolish.
- The audience may turn on you. They'll see you as a jerk for picking on a fellow audience member.

## Ad-Lib Techniques to Crush Hecklers

**Let the heckler dig his own grave.** Like politicians, hecklers don't need much help making themselves look stupid. Try simply *repeating* what they said, then commenting on it by applying an attitude and driving it to an act-out.

**Embarrass the heckler by talking to the heckler's companion.** If the heckler is with a friend or date, ask them to make the jerk shut up. The heckler may be trying to impress the companion, and if you make that person feel uncomfortable, the heckler will probably shut up. To the woman say, "*You must now be rethinking using Tinder, am I right?*" To the man say, "*Sir, it's time for her medication.*"

**Get the audience on your side.** If a heckler persists in challenging you, try getting the audience to shut them up for you. Ask them if the person is bothering them. When they respond with a loud "Yes!" or by applauding, the heckler's usually so embarrassed they'll knock it off.

“Once at the Riviera in Vegas, a woman stood up in the middle of my show and said, ‘I’ve never been so insulted! If you don’t apologize, I’ll never come back here again!’ I replied, ‘Well first of all, I’m not going to apologize. And second of all, I hear Harrah’s is very nice.’

## —Michael Paul

**Phrase a retort in the form of a question.** The reason for this is twofold:

**A.** Asking a question causes the heckler to stop and think of an answer. This breaks his or her rhythm, and the pause gives you a chance to think of another comeback. Make fun of how slow he or she is in responding, or answer the question for the heckler in a funny way. In other words, *take back control* of the situation.

**B.** Phrase the comeback as a “yes or no” question because that’s a no win for the heckler. No matter the response, they’ll sound foolish. For example, “*Sir, does it bother you knowing that your mother is also your sister?*” No matter what response the heckler gives, it will sound stupid. The heckler will see a no-win situation and most likely won’t even answer.

**Slow down and torment the heckler.** When a heckler interrupts the show, you don’t have to go for a zinger right away. British comic Jimmy Carr turns destroying hecklers into a work of art as he plays with them like a fish on the line. For example:

*Male Heckler: When does the comedy start?*

*Carr: It’s a classic heckler, right? What’s your name, sir?*

*Male Heckler: Rack.*

*Carr: Like shoe rack? You’re called Rack? Where are you, Rack? Up there or down there? If you don’t think the comedy has started, you’re right. ‘Cause it’s a very individual thing. Isn’t it? And if the show’s not for you, it’s not for you. But I suppose, Rack, you have learned a valuable lesson. You’ve learned life’s not fair. You pay your money; you take your chance. Sometimes it’s a good show, sometimes it’s not for you. But I’ll give you another example, Rack, so you haven’t had a wasted evening. At least you’ve learned something. Another example, Rack, of how unfair our society is. Let’s say, if a man, you or I, sir, let’s say, if a man sleeps with*

*loads and loads of women. What is he? He's a stud, he's a player, and he's admired in our society. That isn't an opinion, that's fact. If a man sleeps with loads and loads of women, he's a stud, he's a player, he's admired. But, if a woman sleeps with loads and loads of men, she's called Rack's mum.*

Bam!

**Don't encourage heckling.** If you have a rowdy audience, don't encourage heckling. You can, however, involve them in your set by asking simple yes-or-no questions. This is a fun way to involve the audience in your act without encouraging them to yell out individual thoughts.

For instance, "Anybody watch the Super Bowl?" elicits a simple "yes" answer, and then it's right back to you.

If you're too scared to be in the moment with a heckler, have a planned comeback.

## **Planned Heckler Comebacks**

Many beginning comics lack the confidence to ad-lib a retort. So, it can be handy to have some canned responses on hand. It can come off as a little hacky, but it gets the job done until you gain enough confidence to riff comebacks on the spot.

Don't use cliché put-downs like, "*See what happens when the fetus doesn't get enough oxygen,*" or, "*You're two tacos short of a combo plate.*" It should go without saying that when bashing the heckler, don't use racial, ethnic, gay, or any other kind of discriminatory put-downs. Male comics: don't bash a female heckler with stereotypes even if she's sloppy drunk, dumb as a rock, and has more facial hair than you do. It will only make *you* look bad, not her. Your heckler might be mean, but you need to be clever.

**Never** steal another comic's lines, whether you find them in this book, on the internet, or onstage. Word

gets around quickly about comics who steal. Ad-lib your response in the moment.

Examples of excellent comebacks to hecklers:

**Arthur Smith:** *“Look, it’s all right to donate your brain to science, but shouldn’t you have waited till you died?”*

**Rodney Dangerfield:** *“Hey buddy, you ought to save your breath. You’ll need it later to blow up your inflatable date.”*

**Russell Kane:** *“Why don’t you go into the corner and finish evolving?”*

**Jasper Carrott:** *“Sit back in your chair and I’ll plug it in.”*

**Linda Smith:** (In response to calls of “Get your tits out!”) *“Why—is it time for your feeding?”*

**Amy Schumer:** *“What’s that? You want to know where I got my boots? They’re from ‘You Can’t Afford Them and Stop Talking to Me.’”*

**Billy Connolly:** *“Did your mother never tell you not to drink on an empty head?”*

**Bo Burnham:** (Mimicking the thoughts of the heckler) *“You know what I’m going to do tonight? I’m going to heckle an eighteen-year-old kid who’s following his f\*\*\*king dreams.”*

**Shazia Mirza:** *“All men are pigs. Especially you, sir. Unfortunately, I can’t eat pork.”*

**Frank Skinner:** (To a heckler who said, “I met you at medical school.”) *“Ah, yes. You were the one in the jar.”*

*Now do a practice heckler comeback exercise with your Comedy Buddy.*

# EXERCISE 33: HECKLER PREPAREDNESS

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 33: Heckler Comebacks

### Comedy Buddy Exercise

Practice your act while your Comedy Buddy heckles you. Rather than going for a canned response, engage your buddy/heckler in a dialogue following this format:

1. Repeat the heckle, so the entire audience has heard the heckle.
2. Ask the heckler a question. This will give you some time to play with a response.
3. Respond with something funny.

*See if you can come up with five original comebacks. Got any good ones? Add them to your Comedy Bible Workbook.*



# Final Performance Tips: Comedy Timing

Comedy timing cannot be taught in a book. It's foolish to even try. Timing is something you acquire after a lot of stage time. Instead, let's discuss leaving time for the audience to laugh.

## Drugs, Alcohol and Comedy

Performing under the influence is known to mess up timing and a comic's connection to the audience. I've seen comics so messed up that they said a joke twice to an audience. OK, that was me. Many comics do get high when creating material, but I agree with Lily Tomlin who said, "The best mind-altering drug is the truth."

Now that you're ready to perform (oh yes you are!), it's critical to know when to leave room for the laughs. That means after delivering a joke, you *wait!*

Actors say they fear stand-up because they don't want to be onstage alone. The thing is, when doing stand-up, you're *never* alone.

Stand-up is inherently a dialogue. The comic says something, and the audience reacts. But, if the comic *steps on* that reaction, meaning they don't

leave time for the audience to laugh, the audience not only misses the beginning of the next joke, they become disengaged.

So, set up your joke, pay it off, and then *wait!* This is the moment you receive feedback from the audience. This is also where you do the *tag*—a repeat of the *attitude*—by nodding your head and asking, “*Yep, it’s weird, right?*”

It’s imperative for you to *milk* that moment while *looking* at the audience. If you drop your head to look at your set list, you’ll immediately disconnect from the audience. Take in the laughter, the boos, and sometimes even the lack of a reaction. The feedback from the audience may not be what you want or expect, but you must stay in the reality of the situation. This is the only way to respond organically to what’s happening between you and *this* audience.

A joke might not get the laugh you expect, but what you do with the moment after that might create magic.

“When testing new jokes in front of an audience, I talk very quietly in a monotone voice where there’s almost zero performance in there, to see if the material holds up. If the crowd laughs despite my dull delivery, then I know the joke is really good.

**—From Ali Wong’s essay collection, *Dear Girls***

## **Comedy Timing and Volume**

Tips on getting the audience to laugh (even if your material isn’t that funny):

By saying the laugh line *louder* (especially during act-outs), chances are you’ll get a laugh. The shift in volume, just by itself, is funny. That

means:

Slow setup = Fast payoff

Soft setup = Loud payoff

Subtle setup = Exaggerated payoff

Loud = Confident

I was hired to do punch-up work for a Disney sitcom by TV producer and former student, Rob Lotterstein.

Punch-up is when a group of writers sit around a table pitching ways to make the script funnier. I was nervous about pitching with seasoned comedy writers, but a friend provided great advice: **“Even if you have no confidence about the material you’re pitching, do it louder. Even if it sucks, you’ll look confident.”**

## Timing Your Set

When it comes to how much time you spend onstage, set length is critical. If you’re scheduled to do a five-minute set and it’s going so well you do ten minutes, you might not be asked back to that club. That’s because you’ve ruined the timing for the rest of the evening’s comics. *Keep to your time!*

Most clubs have a red light alerting the comic when there’s one minute left (this may vary from club to club). Even though you’ve timed your act at home, with crowd work and a lot of laughs, the length of your act will change. So, know how long your last bit is and make sure you can *segue to your last joke from any place in your set*.

*Don't end your set with "That's my time!" It's a good joke to say at the end of your life, but at the end of a stand-up set, it's a cliché and hacky. Always make sure the audience knows your set has ended. A simple "Thank you!" is fine, and as we've learned, a callback always kills.*

*If you go over your time when performing at a comedy club, you might not be asked back, even if you kill. So, let's do a final rehearsal so you can time your act.*

## **EXERCISE 34: COMING IN ON TIME**

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### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

Practice timing your set. Understand the timing in your rehearsal will be very different in a club setting due to laughs and audience interaction. Rehearse segues to your last bit from different sections in your act.

*Now go out and do your gig! You are ready.*

*When you're done, let's review and find areas for improvement. Don't forget to record your set!*

# Reviewing and Rewriting Your Act

One of the hardest parts of being a performer is listening to a recording of your act. Many comics have a hard time listening to their voice. But, after doing it a lot, it will become second nature.

I went backstage to say hi to stand-up star (and former student) Maz Jobrani after his set at the Comedy Store. He had just come offstage a few minutes before and was already listening to his recording and taking notes. He told me that he had another show in a few hours and was making changes, preparing to do a new one-hour special in a month.

Seasoned pros know that all jokes can be better, with shorter setups, extended act-outs, and adding mixes. The first step is to listen to the recording of your act to find out how you did.

*Let's go over the recording of your set and mathematically figure out how you did using the LPM (laughs per minute) formula.*

## EXERCISE 35: ACT REVIEW— CALCULATING YOUR LAUGH SCORE

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > Setlists

As it's hard to be objective about how your set went, here's a proven method to answer the question, "*How did I do?*"

Listen to the recording of your act with your set list in front of you. Write next to each joke a number from 0 to 5 using this as a reference:

5 = Laughs and applause (*killer*)

4 = Laughs and a smattering of applause

3 = Strong laughs, no applause

2 = Smattering of laughs

1 = a few giggles

0 = No laughs

Add up the total number and divide by your stage time. That provides your LPM (laughs per minute) score.

1. Add up your total laughter points: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Minutes onstage: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Divide line 1 by line 2 and enter your LPM: \_\_\_\_\_

If you're total is:

12 to 20 = Take a bow, rock star. Keep at it and you'll soon be making the *big bucks*.

9 to 12 = Nice job. You're ready to progress to paid gigs, but you may want to think about shortening your setups.

6 to 9 = Not bad. Practice with your Comedy Buddy some more to raise those numbers next time.

Below 6 = Are you sure your jokes are in proper stand-up structure? Are your topics authentic? Did you do your set high? You might want to get rid of some clunkers and rewrite others.

# EXERCISE 36: ACT REVIEW—REWRITING YOUR ACT

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act

## Comedy Bible Workbook > Setlists

Review the jokes that got a LPM score of 1 or 2 and rewrite your jokes in your “My Act” folder, by answering these questions:

### 1. Was there a logic disconnect?

We’ve all heard a joke and thought, “I don’t get it.” Being perplexed is the opposite of being entertained. Audiences need to get what you’re saying. For the jokes that didn’t get a laugh, look at every word in your setup and make sure none are vague, have double meanings, are in the wrong order, hard to follow, or contain references that are too obscure for a particular room.

### 2. Do you have a poorly written setup?

Sometimes we’re passionate about a topic, but the joke doesn’t work. Don’t throw away a joke that didn’t get a laugh if you like the topic. Try setting it up differently, with a different attitude or with a clearer premise. Better yet, make sure you actually have a premise. If so, next time try performing it with *more* attitude.

### 3. Did the joke have an act-out or a turn?

Forgetting to put in the funny part of the joke guarantees you won’t get a laugh. Focus on where people were supposed to laugh and add an act-out or a turn at that point.

#### **4. Were your turns/premises too predictable?**

People laugh when they *don't see it coming*. Did you do something *unexpected* with the act-out or the turn? If not, try taking the joke in another direction. Or, redo the setup to make it less obvious where you're going with the punchline.

#### **5. Could people hear your joke?**

If audience members ask their friends, "What did she say?" then they aren't laughing. This is a simple fix. Speak up!

#### **6. Was your material inauthentic?**

You wrote great jokes—for someone else. Meaning you're not comfortable delivering your own material. Write material that comes from your truths and your authentic feelings about the topics.

#### **7. Did you have story setups rather than premises?**

Stories do not get as high an LPM (laughs per minute) score as stand-up material. If you're getting a laugh at the end of a long story, you can get more laughs by breaking the story up into stand-up comedy format. You're telling stories when you're often saying things like, "And then..."

#### **8. Was there a clear attitude you held throughout the joke?**

Get back in touch with the emotion of your joke: hard, weird, scary or stupid. Fully committing to the emotion of your joke keeps both you and the audience engaged.

#### **9. Did you step on your laughs?**

If you don't leave room for the audience to laugh, they'll stop laughing. Stand-up isn't a monologue, it's a *conversation* where you talk,



and the audience reacts. (To learn how to “milk laughs,” see the chapter on Tags, Segues, and Getting Laughs in Between Jokes)

## **10. Were you having an off night?**

We’ve *all* had bad nights when we’re just off. We’re disconnected, distracted, or for some reason, not present. Sometimes we’re bored doing the same material over and over again and no longer picture what we’re talking about. And if *we* aren’t into what *we* are saying, the audience won’t be either. Solution: Write something new.

## **11. Was it your second time performing the same material?**

Something magical happens when performing material for the first time. Because you don’t know yet where the laughs will come, each occurrence is a surprise. And because you’re performing the material for the first time, chances are you’re into it, visually *and* emotionally. The second time you perform, rather than being present, you’re anticipating the laughs. When new comics start going for the laughs and neglect trying to communicate something real to the audience, that subtle shift is deadly. Picture what you perform.

## **12. Right Material—Wrong Audience**

And finally...the reason your jokes about your colorful sex life didn’t get a laugh might be because half the audience was a conservative church choir. Perhaps you don’t need to change your material, just where you perform. That’s why it’s always a great idea to try material out on different audiences before tossing anything out.


So, rewrite your material and try it again with a new audience. Don’t toss a joke out because it didn’t work once. Rewrite, perform, and repeat.

*If you bombed, you will want to read the next section.*

# Bouncing Back After Bombing

*“Is there any way to prevent bombing? It feels as if my entire act was toast.”*

Bombing happens. Even after many years of performing, it's still true that new material always comes with a risk of failure, and old material gets, well, old. It's the comic's conundrum.

 The more you do stuff, the better you get at dealing with how you still fail at it a lot of the time.

**—John Mulaney**

Can you relate to this feeling?

*I feel sweat coming out of every pore. I see one by one, people's eyes glazing over and they're crossing their arms and legs. Is it nature calling or is it me? Probably me. I get louder. My voice gets higher. I go faster and faster, feeling as if I'm an auctioneer on the Titanic. I pick out a couple in the front row and talk to them. This doesn't work. The audience is pulling further and further away from me, slipping through my fingers as I desperately try to grab their attention, but I keep coming up empty-handed. And as I leave the stage, the emcee doesn't meet my eyes. We both know it's a train wreck. It feels as if someone died, but there's no body.*

Bombing is most often the result of the comic being *disconnected* from the audience. And it feels horrible—for everyone.

We all know why bad comics bomb, but why do good comics bomb, too? Here's why: Bombing is an essential part of being good. If you aren't bombing, that means you're not trying out new material. Watch Jerry Seinfeld try out new jokes and bomb in the documentary, *I'm Telling You for the Last Time*. It will show you that *every* comic bombs and that gives you hope. If you don't take risks, you won't be good. Conversely, if you take risks, you'll bomb some of the time.

Here are some tips on minimizing your chances of bombing, even with fresh material.

## **Bombing Fix #1: Take Charge of the Room's Layout**

When performing in a traditional comedy club, the physical layout of the room is something you *don't* have to worry about. Clubs are designed to give comics optimal chances of getting laughs with:

- A bright spotlight on the comic, focusing the audience's attention.
- Low ceilings so audience laughter reverberates throughout the room.
- Seating that's close to the comic, facilitating a connection.

On the other hand, comics are often asked to perform in venues that are not so conducive to stand-up. These include multi-purpose/meeting rooms, golf course clubhouses, hotel conference rooms, or on a revolving stage. *Bomb alert.*

### **Circling the Drain**

Someone once had the brilliant idea that a revolving stage in a dinner theater would be a great place for a comedy show. And I was the beneficiary of their ingenuity. That meant setting up a joke to one section of the audience and delivering the punchline to a different group of people on the other side of the room. Virtually everyone was on board the “What did she say?” train. Small wonder I bombed that night.

A connection with the audience is *essential*. No eye contact with the audience = no laughs. Establishing and maintaining a connection is impossible if the room lacks a discernible stage, is noisy, or has intermittent visual distractions. It’s up to you to identify and try to remedy as many impediments as possible prior to going on.

Once I got booked to do a corporate gig and discovered that they wanted me to perform in the lobby of a Hyatt Hotel. During the sound-check, I noticed there were no chairs. They wanted me to do my “little act” standing on the floor by the margarita machine while audience members wandered drunkenly around me. I told the booker, “That’s not gonna work.”

She replied, “Well it worked for last year’s act.”

“Oh? And who was that?”

“A mariachi band.”

Rather than explaining why chairs and a stage were necessary for comedy, I simply took matters into my own hands. I called up the hotel manager and asked for fifty chairs. I helped set them up and personally paid for a four-foot by eight-foot platform. Yes, some of my jokes were drowned out by the margarita blender, which I mixed into the act, but I avoided what would have inevitably been a complete bomb.

Moral? It's your job to *take ownership of your act* and do everything you can to make it a success, especially when the space you're given is a recipe for failure.

Always be proactive:

- Arrange a sound-check before you go on (usually not necessary if it's a comedy club).
- Make sure your audience is able to see you.
- Make sure your audience is close to the stage.
- Make sure the lights will be pointed in your direction (I have actually gotten a ladder and a broom to adjust the stage lights toward me rather than the flower display).
- Make sure you'll be heard clearly in the back of the room.

My contract states the audience must be seated within three feet of the stage. I've had too many gigs where a huge dance floor separates the audience from the stage—or, as comics call it, *The Valley of Dead Laughs*.

Take charge of the room to give your material a chance.

*However, sometimes it's not a matter of the room; but rather, the people in it.*

## **Bombing Fix #2: Match Your Act to the Audience**

You've undoubtedly heard, "You can't please all the people all the time." Same goes for comedy: You can't make *everyone* laugh *every* time. Of course, when you gain a following, you'll naturally attract the *right* audience. But what do you do when starting out and you're stuck with an audience that's not right for your material?

Here are some examples of right material, wrong audience:

**Age.** Those menopause jokes are going to flame out with a college audience.

**Politics.** Politically progressive jokes will bomb if playing to a conservative group, and those gay bashing jokes will not work... well...anywhere.

**Religion.** Oy! Jewish jokes in Arkansas will land in the Dead Sea of Silence.

**Gender.** Your male-bashing jokes could get you bashed at a biker bar.

**Language.** Dropping the F-bomb will bomb at the Baptist Comedy Night.

**Sexual material.** There will be no Big O of laughter at a kid's birthday party.

***“So, what do I do when the audience doesn't match my material?”***

It's simple—get more material so you can adapt your material to match the audience. As you write more material, you'll build a database of jokes you can pull out for specific audiences. Most comics have college material, women's material, squeaky-clean jokes for church groups, and sex jokes for late-night drunken audiences. Keep creating and refreshing different set lists for different audiences.

Before you go onstage, do some reconnaissance on the audience, such as:

- Researching the club's social media to gauge the demographic of a typical night.

- Asking the club manager ahead of time, or at least when you arrive, if there are any large groups in the audience, and if the club attracts a certain type of customer.
- Read online reviews to see who people liked, didn't like, and why.
- Ask comics who have played there.

## **Bombing Fix #3: Deal with Your Spot in the Lineup**

Even if you're the "Second Coming of Comedy," things could get rough if you're in front of an audience that's worn out from a long evening, in a completely different mindset, or would prefer to be somewhere else.

The solution to being in the wrong place in a lineup is to have patience. Call the situation by reacting with empathy and humor. If they're tired, meet them there, as it were, and then revive them with some high-energy humor. If you feel they're preoccupied with something annoying in the environment, such as lousy air conditioning, work that distraction into your set. In short, use the problem to fix the problem.

## **Bombing Fix #4: Be There**


It can't be said enough: Show up and be *present*.

It's magical when someone who's never performed before takes the stage and blows the roof off the place. Many times, however, that same person bombs their second time up. The reason is a trap called *stuck in time*.

The second time some of my star students perform, they expect the exact same reaction they got the first time. When they don't get a laugh in the same spot as the time before, they're completely thrown off. This happens because they're not *present* with the audience, who are right in front of them. When you say something in *expectation* of a reaction, it alters your connection with the audience.



One of the most important skills for performing stand-up is giving each audience the feeling you're saying the material for the first time. To create that connection, picture in your mind what you're talking about every time you say it. This subtle shift can be the difference between getting laughs instead of blank stares.

 I have to visualize my jokes, live my jokes, feel the audience because every audience is different. It's like having a different dancing partner every night.

—Rita Rudner

## **Bombing Fix #5: Go with the Venue Style**

Like it or not, people expect a certain kind of performance when deciding where to go for an evening of comedy. With that in mind, you'll most likely bomb when telling stories, reciting limericks, or singing acapella in a comedy club. Also, a rhythm will be set by the comics who've gone on before you. If you do something wildly outside the audience's expectations, you won't get the reaction you want. I am not saying you shouldn't take chances. Just know you stand a better chance when fitting your act into the format of the venue.

## **How to Rebound from a Disaster**

*“So, what can I do next time I’m onstage and bombing?”*

Here are some tips on recovering on the spot to avoid disaster.

## **Use Your Body to Get Laughs**

When things onstage aren't going well, many inexperienced comics start pacing.

Although physicality is a powerful way to connect with an audience, pacing is *not* the right way. Stick to this rule: remain still on the setup, and then move your body when acting out a character. This way if the audience isn't into you, you'll get into your act-out and break through to them.

You can also use gestures to orchestrate an audience into laughing. When you deliver a laugh line, say it *louder*, take a beat, and punch out your hands to the audience while nodding your head and holding on to the attitude. It's as if you're saying, "Isn't that hard, weird, hard, scary, or stupid?" In my workshops, students do this speaking only gibberish, and they still get people to laugh. Just remember to keep your head up during the punchline. If you look down, you'll cut off the laugh.

“For my first show at *SNL* I wrote a Bill Clinton sketch, and during our read-through, it wasn't getting any laughs. This weight of embarrassment came over me, and I felt like I was sweating from my spine out. But I realized, 'Okay, that happened, and I did not die.' You've got to experience failure to understand that you can survive it.

—Tina Fey

## Use Your Savers

*“But what happens if I don't get a laugh?”*

Not getting a laugh is another opportunity for a tag. Comment on the fact that the audience didn't relate to what you said, then pull a laugh out of the truth of the moment: *"That joke worked much better in my head when I was imagining an audience of entitled millennials!"* Just as you previously wrote *savers* for forgetting your material, stockpile some *savers* for when the audience doesn't laugh at a joke you were expecting would kill. New comics generally write and memorize these lines ahead of time, while more experienced comics like to improvise them in the moment. Some pros don't believe in commenting when a joke doesn't work. They just accept that they're bombing, figure out later what happened, then rework specific jokes.

“Had a bad set? Go home and write. Had a great set? Go home and write. Few things can offset the feelings of helplessness in show business than engaging in one of the few things over which you have total control.

—Gary Gulman

In your *savers*, admit you're bombing and have a funny saving line such as:

*"I should have known when I read my horoscope today and it said, 'Don't leave the house.'"*

More examples from professional comics:

“Let me just say this: you get one shot at life...and I'm blowing it!

**—Judah Rosenstein**

Comic Tim Wilson used to say, *“Well I just threw that one in tonight and I guess I’ll be throwing it out later.”*

“This is the part of the show where I invite people from the audience to come up onstage...and save me...Any first responders?

**—Sybil Adelman Sage**

“I have many jobs. One night I do a comedy show. Although not tonight, clearly.

**—Michael Paul**

Part of Steve Martin’s persona was his unwavering belief he was extremely talented. If the audience didn’t get it, he’d act like the joke was brilliant and they were just not smart enough to realize it. It worked.

## **Admit or Ignore You are Bombing?**

I’ll never forget a gig where I was bombing so badly, that people turned their chairs so they were facing *away* from the stage. I went from joke to joke, and nothing. I went into another joke, *“You know when you’re not yourself...”* and rather than going into my highly practiced routine, I said, *“like I am right now.”* The truth of that statement was so powerful and honest that I burst into tears onstage. Everyone stopped talking, as I sputtered out the truth in between sobs, *“I don’t know what’s wrong tonight. I’m trying so hard and...”* People turned their chairs to face the stage. *“I thought you would laugh... but no!”* People started to laugh. Someone handed me their cocktail napkin to wipe my eyes. *“Maybe my grandmother*

*was right, I should have been a bank teller.” More laughs and everything I said from this point on was landing. I closed to a standing ovation. It was then I realized that connecting to an audience means first connecting to myself, then admitting the truth of the situation.*

*Now, let’s write some bombing savers.*

## EXERCISE 37: BOMBING SAVERS

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercise > Exercise 37: Bombing Savers

In Exercise 6, I asked you to create some *savers* for when and if you forget your act. Here we are going to create a document called “Bombing Savers” and write at least five savers to use when the room gets quiet:

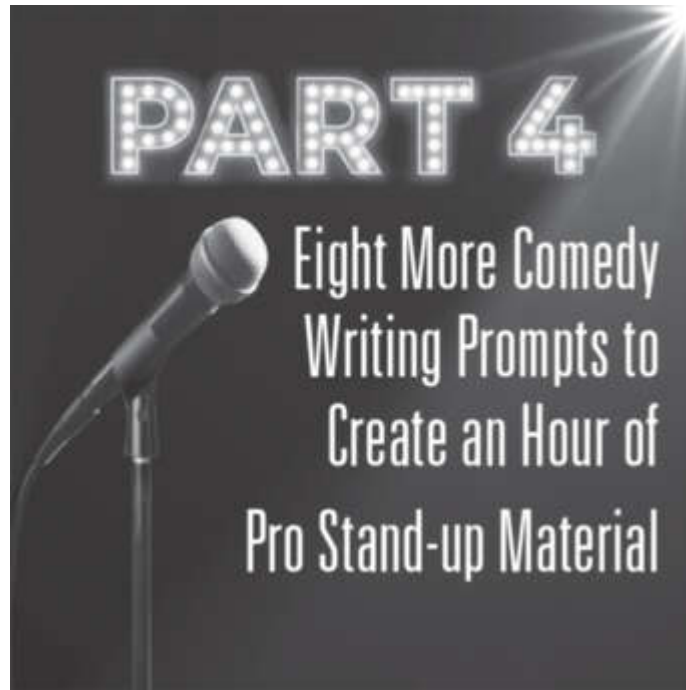
1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Look through all the bombing suggestions and pick your favorites to do next time you’re tanking:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Congratulations—you have enough material for several short sets. The only way to truly know if your material works is performing it in front of a live audience. Record it. Review it. Rewrite it. Repeat.

*Want to get paid to do comedy? You need a lot of material. Let's develop your sixty-minute set.*



The more you write, the more material you'll develop, which will increase your chances of getting paid gigs. After all, if you can sustain consistent laughs for an hour, that means you're a headliner. And headliners get TV comedy specials, tours, and stalkers. This section contains eight exercises to help generate new material, including:

- The Self-Mocking Formula.
- Half and Half Mash-Ups.
- Dialogue Jokes.
- Comparison Jokes.
- Political Comedy and Current Events.
- Doing Impressions Without Sounding Hack.

- Observational Humor.
- Riffing New Material Onstage.

Invest time in trying out these exercises and your “Polished Joke” folder will expand, hopefully to the point where you’ll need a larger hard drive!

*A one-hour stand-up show is approximately 6,500 words. So, let’s get busy, starting with a new possible opening for your show.*



# Poke Fun at Yourself: The Self-Mocking Formula

## *Best placement in your act: Opening*

A strong way to open is to make fun of what the audience is looking at: you. Having the humility to laugh at your own expense not only creates a connection, it creates likability.

“Laugh loudly, laugh often, and most importantly, laugh at yourself.

—Chelsea Handler

“I’m overweight. Whoo hoo! There are advantages to that—I’m shade in the summer and warm in the winter.

—Douglas Lower

“ (Yeah, I’m overweight...) I’m a reverse Incredible Hulk. Because I burst out of my clothes and then get mad.

—Sarah Millican

Start with the obvious. When people meet you, what do they see or hear that makes you not the perfect woman or perfect man? Do you have an obvious ethnic background? Do they see love handles? That you're over fifty? Do you have an accent or an unusual voice? Are you blonde? In this exercise, you'll learn it's not just an expanding waistline, it's a punchline.

If you think you're perfect, then your defect might be, "I'm in denial."

*Get honest with yourself in the next exercise.*

## EXERCISE 38: SELF-MOCKING OPENING

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercise > Exercise 38: Self-Mocking Opening

Think of five *negative* aspects of yourself that are either physically obvious—your weight, hairline, age, gender, fashion sense, etc.—or are character flaws. Anything making you different or quirky can be comedy gold.

If there's nothing obvious about your appearance to make fun of, then write down *negative* things your friends, kids, or coworkers might say about you, none of it flattering. For instance, are you a control freak, bossy, snarky, or lazy?

My five obvious visuals about myself, or my character defects are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Take each of those five defects through this simple self-mocking comedy method:

1. “*I’m...*” Insert something that’s obvious or a little embarrassing about you.
2. Next, add a one-word comment, something like “*Whoo hoo!*” Now you have a *turn*. You admit something *negative*, then spin it by proclaiming it’s a positive thing. And voila —you have the setup for your joke.
3. In the next part of the joke, *explain* why you proclaimed “*Whoo hoo!*” by saying this line: “*Hey! There are advantages to...(being bald, being fat, being negative, being insensitive).*”
4. Now come up with at least five reasons why it’s a real bonus to have your characteristic.
5. If you’re able to flow into an act-out on any of them, an even bigger laugh follows.

Write down everything generated here in your *Comedy Bible Workbook*.

## **Contrary Thinking**

Self-mocking is an exercise you can practice anywhere, not just on stage. Every day, you have ample opportunities make fun of yourself, especially when someone asks, “How are you?” Instead of,

“Fine,” say, “Why, what have you heard?” Wake people up by not giving predictable replies.

*Next, we’ll learn about half-and-half mash-ups for producing more laughs at your own expense.*

# Half-and-Half Mash-Ups


Use the *half-and-half mash-ups* technique to poke fun at yourself or your heritage to get laughs.

It goes like this: You say, “I’m half *this* and half *that*. And that means...(insert *mash-up*).” Usually, you’ll be playing off stereotypes related to two aspects of your ethnic background, state/country of birth, or personality. If you’re comfortable with it, this will generate a quick laugh at the opening of your set. It’s also used to introduce material about the characteristics you listed in the last exercise.

Here’s a line from former student Dan Nainan using the half-and-half mash-up technique.

*“My dad is from India and my mom is from Japan. So, that means that I get my sushi at 7-Eleven.”*

Giving information about yourself with no laughs is boring. I’m from blah, blah, blah, I went to school in blah, blah, blah, and I became a teacher blah, blah, blah, and now I work at blah, blah, blah...” Use this mash-up method to give information *and* get laughs.

 I grew up in a mixed religious household. And it was volatile. My dad’s atheist, my mom’s agnostic. That meant just constant fighting. ‘There’s no God!’ ‘There might be!’

**—Bonnie McFarlane**

“My husband’s half-Filipino and half-Japanese and I’m half-Chinese and half-Vietnamese. That means that we’re both half-fancy Asian and half-jungle Asian. Yeah! You guys know the difference. The fancy Asians are the Chinese, the Japanese. They get to do fancy things like host Olympics. Jungle Asians host diseases.

**—Ali Wong**

Try mashing up anything in your ethnic background, birthplace, or use a friend’s or relative’s characteristics. For example:

“I have a friend who was half-Jewish and half-Italian. So that means he’s always making himself the best offer he can’t refuse.

**—Tim Tweed**

“I’m half-German and half-Irish. That means I drink a lot, but I’m very strict about it.

**—Erich Viedge**

Mash-ups are also brilliant to do with occupations:

“I have a degree in astronomy and I’m an actress, so that means I know exactly why the sun

revolves around me.

*You get the idea. Let's develop some more material based on your own self-truths.*

## EXERCISE 39: HALF-AND-HALF MASH-UPS

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercise > Exercise 39: My Half-and-Half Mash-Ups

*“Judy, where do I get my list of half-and-half mash-up topics?”*

Revisit the list of topics you created in Exercise 7: My Authentic Topics.

Add to that list:

1. Your hobbies and interests.
2. Places you've lived.
3. Other interesting tidbits about you (phobias, etc.).

Looking over the list, insert your personal information into these mash-up examples:

*“I was born in (insert place) but now I live in (insert place) and that means ...”*

*“I had (insert former job) and I've had (insert another former job), and that means...”*

*I'm part (insert ethnic background) and part (ethnic background) and that means, I (insert mash-up)... ”*

Repeat this method at least ten times with different topics and record your answers.

When finished, pick the funniest ones and record the clunkers in your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” folder and the winners in your “My Polished Jokes” folder.

*Now on to one of the most popular ways of making audiences laugh: comparison jokes.*



# Comparison Jokes

*“I couldn’t find stuff for the mash-up exercise. Can I compare things not related to me?”*

In the half-and-half mash-up, you compared two aspects of *your* life. With comparison jokes, you get laughs by comparing any two groups of people or things. These types of jokes are a part of every pro comic’s set.

Read these jokes *aloud* to get a feel for comparison jokes before writing your own.

## Men versus Women

“When women are depressed, they either eat or go shopping. Men invade another country.

—Elayne Boosler

## Being Gay versus Being Poor

“Yeah, went out with my friend. He’s gay. We get along really well. He’s gay, I’m broke. It’s weird how poor people and gay people have a lot in common... Both born that way... Women just want

to be our friends. And when you finally tell your parents they're like, 'Yeah, we knew.'

—Mark Normand

## **Phone Addiction versus Alcohol Addiction**

“Everybody goes, 'Hey, phone addiction—better than alcohol.' I don't know. Same side effects. Both dangerous while driving, both are what I go to when I'm nervous at a party, and both have helped us all sleep with very regrettable people.

—Jim Jeffries

## **Before versus Now**

“The longer I'm single, the lower my standards get. At the beginning, I was really picky, 'She gotta look like this, she gotta have this.' Now, I'm like, 'Who needs teeth? You smile with your heart, that's all that matters.'

—Preacher Lawson

## **Children versus Cigarettes**

“I love my son the same way that I love cigarettes. I like to hold him for five minutes every hour, and

the rest of the time, I'm thinking about how he's f\*\*king killing me.

—Jim Jeffries

*Now, let's write some comparison jokes of your own.*

## EXERCISE 40: COMPARISON JOKES

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 40: Comparison Jokes

Comparison jokes follow the same structure as other jokes:




Let's develop your own comparison jokes by adding to these setups.

### Comparison Joke: Them versus Me

In this joke, compare yourself to someone more successful than you, like comic Nick Griffin does here:

*"So many stupid articles about celebrities always exaggerate their lives and try to make them seem so amazing. 'He worked three years as a dishwasher before he made it big.' Hey, I worked three years as a dishwasher before I became a bus boy."*

 Oprah says, ‘You can have extra money to spend by finding cash in your pockets.’ That’s weird because I looked through my pockets and only found an old condom and two paper clips. I guess I could make a dreamcatcher.

—Anna Abbott

1. Pick a current celebrity or well-known figure and act out a recent quote or article that makes them sound successful.
2. Do an act-out comparing something similar in your life with the celebrity’s.

Write two jokes using this formula:

(*Celebrity*) says, (*insert act-out*) \_\_\_\_\_. That’s so (*insert attitude*) because I’m \_\_\_\_\_.

Comparison jokes also work with a *turn* rather than an act-out. Here’s an example from comic Dennis Miller:

*“The president of the US is seventy-four years old and we give him access to the nuclear button. My grandfather’s the same age and we won’t give him control of the TV remote.”*

Now write two jokes using each of these formulas:

1. It’s *hard* in this economy to hear about rich celebrity lifestyles. (*insert a celebrity and what they have*) \_\_\_\_\_. OMG! I’d be lucky to...\_\_\_\_\_.

2. It's *scary* to hear so many politicians getting away with corruption. (insert public figure and what they got away with) \_\_\_\_\_. I'd be lucky to...\_\_\_\_\_.
3. It's *weird* to hear about the stuff super-rich people do. (insert a rich person and what they did) \_\_\_\_\_. I'd be lucky to...\_\_\_\_\_.

## Comparison Jokes: Before versus Now

The simple before-versus-now comparison works for sharing things you've noticed changing over the years.

In this example, George Lopez compares how he's raising his kid to how his grandmother brought him up:

*"If you have a kid now, you have to pretend that everything they do is the best thing you've ever seen. At Thanksgiving I'm saying to my kid, 'Oh my God, did you trace the outside of your hand and make me a turkey? I'm putting this drawing on Facebook!' When I was a kid, I remember giving a drawing to my grandmother and she said, 'What is this bullshit? Stop using my eyebrow pencil!'"*

**Pro Tip:** In comparison jokes, it's best if the first actout is *long* and the second one is *short*, such as Sherri Shepherd's joke about comparing your first divorce to your second divorce.

*"When you're divorced once it's okay, everyone has sympathy for you. Your friends are like, 'Don't worry girl, he's an asshole! He ain't nobody! You're a queen, you're a child of God! Girl, God's got you.' But when*

*you get divorced that second time they like, 'What's wrong with you?'"*

Now, fill in the blanks below with at least three different versions of the before-versus-now method.

1. It's *weird* how getting older changes what you want in a relationship. Before I used to want \_\_\_\_\_ (*do an act-out*) and now I want \_\_\_\_\_ (*do an act-out*).
2. The state of the economy has really changed my goals: Before I used to... \_\_\_\_\_ (*do an act-out*). Now I... \_\_\_\_\_ (*do an act-out*).
3. When I first started dating I was looking for \_\_\_\_\_ (*do an act-out*). Now what I want is... \_\_\_\_\_ (*do an actout*).

## **Comparison Jokes: My Culture/Home versus Your Culture/Home**

When you travel, comparison jokes are a surefire way to get laughs simply by comparing where you are to where you live.

“The women in California, they get scared. A guy flashes you, you go to the police, ‘He’s flashing! He’s flashing!’ In New York, a guy flashes you, you take your embroidery hoop and play ring toss.

**—Joan Rivers**

Fill in the blanks with at least three different versions:

1. Moving is *hard* because the same gestures you're familiar with can be interpreted differently in a new place. In my hometown you...  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Here in (*insert city*) you...\_\_\_\_\_.

2. Traveling around the country/world you notice how *weird* some places are. Like in (*name of city/town*)...\_\_\_\_\_. Whereas in (*name of this city*)...\_\_\_\_\_.

Copy the best material you developed from this exercise to your *Comedy Bible Workbook*.

*Next up is a way to get the last laugh.*

# Dialogue Jokes

Has anyone ever said something really stupid to you, and you froze, unable to think of a snappy response? Well, onstage you have an out— creating and saying a snappy comeback you’d *wished you said*. Stand-up allows you to get the last laugh.

A dialogue joke is acting out a scene between you and another person. The method goes like this:

1. You describe something stupid someone—your mother, boss, spouse, kid, dentist, etc.—says.
2. You pause to let the audience ruminate on how stupid or weird the comment was.
3. You tell the audience what you wished you would’ve said.

For example, your mother says, “Are you wearing that shirt?” In real life, you’d probably just reply, “Yes, leave me alone!” But onstage you can rewrite the scene to make yourself wittier. For instance:

*“Mom: ‘If I didn’t have you, I could have been a doctor.’*

*Me: ‘If I didn’t have you, I wouldn’t need a therapist.’”* —Joy Keishian

When Chris Rock takes on his divorce, he repeats what the judge said to him and responds with what he was thinking:



*“Court is scary, to not know if you’re gonna see your kids. I wanted my divorce to be smooth so I bought a house around the corner. It wasn’t enough. That judge was like, ‘Mr. Rock, I need to see pictures of the beds in the bedroom so I know the children have a place to sleep.’*

*I’m thinking: ‘Do you think I have a manger? A million-dollar house with no beds?’”*

## **Surefire Rules for Doing Dialogue Jokes**

1. Don’t go back and forth with tons of dialogue. It isn’t a play—it’s a joke.
2. Make sure you set up the dialogue joke with attitude (weird, scary, stupid) about the thing someone said.
3. Make sure there’s a premise, and tell the audience *why* what someone said is stupid.

“It’s weird now how everything makes you fat. A friend of mine said, ‘You’re fat because of stress.’ That’s weird because Buddha, who is the least stressful guy ever, is huge. I’m so screwed. ‘Tell me Buddha has hypothyroidism for heaven’s sake.’

**—Fábio Porchat**

4. Get bonus laughs by adding a *mix* after the dialogue joke: “Can you imagine this person as a...”

So, in Fábio Porchat's above joke, to add on a mix he could go, "*Can you imagine Buddha going for a doctor's appointment?*" And then do an act-out. "*Well, Buddha, have you thought about getting out of the lotus position and going to a gym? Come on! Try working up a sweat getting to cosmic consciousness!*"

Refer back to Exercise 19: "Family Jokes Using Mixes," to give you an idea of how to add a mix to a dialogue joke.

*Come on! Let's find stupid things that people say to you, but this time you get the last laugh.*

## EXERCISE 41: CREATE A DIALOGUE JOKE

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 41: Dialogue Jokes

1. Make a list of three stupid things people have said to you, or stupid things you've heard celebrities say.
2. Come up with three funny retorts based on what you *wish you had said*, or what someone else should have said.
3. Look through your material to see if you can extend an existing joke by adding on a dialogue joke.

Your **Comedy Bible Workbook** should be filling up with a lot of material, hopefully in your "Polished Jokes" folders. Are you still writing your Morning Pages? Still getting together with your Comedy

Buddy? Transcribe your audio recordings as you just may find a great premise there. Don't break the chain.

# Political Comedy and Current Events

*“Hey Judy, so far I’ve been writing material based on my life, but what about political humor or joking about current events?”*

History is chockfull of comics poking fun at the rich and powerful. In many countries, when politics gets too disturbing, people choose to get their news from late-night TV comics rather than traditional news channels. Clearly, there’s an appetite and opportunity for political humor. (On the other hand, you can alienate audiences if their viewpoint doesn’t match yours.)

Developing your skills as a political humorist provides unique opportunities:

- If you do impressions, political humor allows you to show off that talent.
- Podcasts are incredibly popular for politically minded comedians. If you can turn bad news into comedy, you may find an audience online.
- Social media is ideal for getting your jokes out quickly and helping you establish a following, which can be parlayed into writing jobs.

So, if politics is your obsession—go for it.

## How to Write Political Material

When doing political humor, standard setup-payoff structures apply. However, it's much easier to get a laugh based on personal, rather than political topics, so really hone your delivery. Here are a couple of pointers for brushing up your act:

“Basically, I wake up in the morning and I think everything's going to be great. I'm really kind of optimistic, and I look forward to a new day. I pick up *The New York Times*, and I look at the front page and realize that once again I'm wrong. I start to fixate on stuff.”

—Lewis Black

“The UN did a worldwide survey. According to *The Times*, the only question asked was: ‘Would you please give your honest opinion about solutions to the food shortage in the rest of the world?’ The survey was a huge failure. In Africa they didn't know what ‘food’ meant. In Eastern Europe they didn't know what ‘honest’ meant. In Western Europe they didn't know what ‘shortage’ meant. In China they didn't know what ‘opinion’ meant. In the Middle East they didn't know what ‘solution’ meant. In South America they didn't know what ‘please’ meant. And in the USA they didn't know what ‘the rest of the world’ meant.”

## —Mark Bolton

1. Get the audience on the same page as you by quoting a news item and the source.

For example, set up with, “*According to the New York Times...*”

Then, relay the news event you’ll joke about. Repeating the setup ensures that everyone hears and understands the joke’s premise. Even if it’s big news, don’t assume everyone in the audience studied up on current events before coming to the club.

“ (According to *the Times...*) The Prime Minister’s going to try and get a new Brexit deal, which she won’t, because it has to get through Parliament, and it fails every time. It’s stupid because no one else gets to postpone arguments they know they’re going to lose. It’s like coming home pissed drunk and saying to your wife, (act-out) ‘We’ll discuss this in August.’

## —Russell Howard

2. Hit your delivery with an abundance of attitude, keep your premise simple, and bring it home with an act-out and/or a mix. “*That’s (hard, weird, scary, stupid,) because...*”

“ According to *The New York Times*, an official in the Trump White House said, ‘Calls to foreign leaders appears to be freestyle and ad-libbed

now.’ Which is scary because Trump is basically doing diplomacy like an improv troupe. (act-out) ‘Okay, okay everybody, let’s bring the lights up. I’m about to call a foreign leader. I need suggestions of a country and something to tariff. I heard Switzerland and cuckoo clocks...We take you now to a proctologist office on the moon.’

**—Stephen Colbert**

One of the best formulas for political humor is the *mix*. Compare the target to something totally different, as in the following joke.

“ This Valentine’s Day, Americans must remember that politicians are like a box of chocolates. We bite into them to find out what’s on the inside only to discover that Democrats are too often soft and gooey and Republicans are mostly nuts.

**—Bill Maher**

“ There are courses on how to survive Brexit like it’s the apocalypse. A Brexit ‘prepper’ is teaching people how to survive ‘No Deal’ by fighting off rioters and eating dog food. That’s stupid because A) that’s not going to happen, and B) you don’t need to be taught how to eat dog food. No one has ever looked at dog food and said,

(act-out) 'It looks delicious, but what's the etiquette?'

—Russell Howard

### **Lessons Learned**

One place political humor doesn't work is a corporate gig. I learned that the hard way in Texas by doing a joke about a former Republican president. After delivering what I thought was a killer joke, no less than two-dozen people walked out. At that time in my career, I had no tools, like savers, to recover from the mistake. Don't get caught flat-footed like that. Always consider your audience.

### **Political humor pitfalls to avoid:**

1. Political jokes have a short life span. With today's fast paced news cycle, the joke you worked on in the morning could be outdated by the time you go onstage that night.
2. No matter what topic you choose, chances are most late-night comics, with well-paid writing staffs, have already covered it. The bar is set very high for coming up with innovative material and unique observations.
3. With various cultural and political sensitivities, every joke has a chance of insulting some portion of the audience, so make sure you're



an equal opportunity comic by making fun of people in the groups to which you belong, and those who really deserve it.

4. Political humor pretty much excludes you from corporate gigs (unless you're an impressionist), so save it for the club crowd.

Jo Miller, former executive producer for *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, a comedy show about current events and politics, says, "I've hired comedy writers that I've discovered on Twitter. Very often, this is their first writing job. Looking at their Twitter feed not only shows me their material, but their point of view."

*Even if you aren't political, try creating topical and current event jokes using this next exercise.*

## **EXERCISE 42: CREATING POLITICAL AND CURRENT EVENT JOKES**

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**Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 42: Political Material**

### **Comedy Buddy Exercise**

Grab your Comedy Buddy, go online, and find three current news stories. Then use these three formulas to jam new material:

1. Start a joke with something *stupid* or *weird* the target of your joke refers to. Then come up with a retort someone should have said back to them.

Example:

*“Today, a conservative Christian pastor said, ‘I’m running for president of the United States because God told me to.’ ...That’s weird because God told me not to vote for him!”*

A fun exercise with your Comedy Buddy is to have one of you throw out something in the news and the other comes up with a funny retort. I once presented author and comedic speaker Dale Irvin with a few statistics, and challenged him to give a funny response. Here’s our result using this strategy: “According to *USA Today*, ‘One-third of Americans feel they’re living with extreme stress.’ And *that’s weird* because the other two-thirds are giving it to them.”

2. Create a *mix* joke by putting the target into a different situation, or by comparing your topic to something or someone else. These mixes usually start with:

*“Can you imagine if...” or “It’s like...”*

Example:

*“When asked about the climate change report, Trump said it was ‘Fine, but I don’t believe it.’ How can one man possess all the stupidity of mankind? It’s like they edited his genes to give him superhuman stupidity.” —Trevor Noah*

Bill Maher does an interesting mix here:

*“The Scottish ice-cream parlor selling mayonnaise-flavored ice cream has to apologize to the rest of Scotland. You invented a food that’s shitty even for Scotland. That’s like making a porno that’s too twisted for Japan.”*

3. Futurize the joke by coming up with a *mix* based on, “Next thing you know...” or “Can you imagine if...? It would be like...” So, bring up something that is happening in the news and take it someplace else, such as Michelle Wolf does about the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.

*“It’s hard because a lot of times people think women are moving forward, we’re making progress, and I’m like, ‘Is that progress?’ Sports Illustrated put a plus-size model on their swimsuit issue, and a lot of women were like, ‘Bravo, Sports Illustrated. You’re so innovative. That’s not innovative. They just finally realized that men will also masturbate to fat women. You wanna be innovative? Put a completely clothed woman on there and just talk about her personality. It would be like, ‘This is Rhonda. She loves quilting. Let’s get into the detail.’ Even women would be like, ‘I don’t wanna read that.’”*

4. Political jokes are like any other joke and you can use any or all of the techniques we have gone over, including dialogue and comparison jokes as Dallas comic Dean Lewis does in this joke.

*“I was always told, ‘Anybody can be president.’ When I was a kid I took it be a motivational lesson; as an adult I realize it’s a warning.”*

5. Post your material on Twitter. You just might find that it’s the perfect destination for short-lived political humor and you just might get discovered.

*Do you do impressions? Let's learn how to fit them into stand-up structure.*

# Doing Impressions Without Sounding Hack

*“I do impressions. How do I add them to my material?”*

If you can do voices or celebrity impressions, by all means, put them in your act! Just make sure that, rather than doing a series of them back-to-back, “And for my next impression,” instead, you have a setup, then use the impression as your act-out.

“When I used to watch vaudevillian impressionists, people like Rich Little or Frank Gorshin, I always felt like the voice was the only point. I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to be of the Robin Williams or Jonathan Winters model, where observation and storytelling was important.”

—Frank Caliendo

“I love (NFL Analyst) John Madden because he makes me feel smart. (It’s weird) how he explains things during a football game you already know. He gives you no new information, just sits there

drawing doodles on guys' asses, saying things like, (act-out impression) 'If the quarterback fakes running the ball...and the receiver...catches it in the end zone... that's gonna...that's gonna... that's gonna...that's gonna...be a touchdown.'

—Frank Caliendo

## Dropping in Impressions

Your impressions can sound cheesy if you *introduce* them instead of dropping them into your jokes. Saying, “Imagine if Kanye West worked at a supermarket” or, “Here’s a conversation between Lady Gaga and the President” *announces* you’re going to do an impression, and it’s not very imaginative. Instead, set up the joke with a strong premise, then drop in your impression as an act-out. You’ll get laughs from the element of surprise, as the audience realizes who you’re portraying. Jim Carrey started his comedy career by doing spot-on impressions, and how he wove them into his material was brilliant.

*“Luckily most of us have that voice inside of our head that goes, ‘Turning the car into oncoming traffic is counterproductive.’ If we could learn to control our impulses we could be like Jimmy Stewart because no matter what happens, Jimmy Stewart could look at it in a positive way. (Deacon Stewart impersonation) ‘Well I guess we’re going to have ourselves a nuclear holocaust...Hey, everyone, come on over to the window. Oh, look at that mushroom cloud, it’s beautiful! Amazing thing to me how something so magnificent, so colorful could just melt your face right off!’ That’s positive energy.”*

A smooth way to work impressions into your act is using the comparison joke method for the setup. In Exercise 19: “Family Jokes Using

Mixes,” you wrote a series of “What if...” premises on members of your family. For instance, “*What if your germaphobic sister-in-law worked at a kindergarten?*” This format can lead perfectly to the impression act-out by adding a mix, “*It would be like the president trying to teach these kids while not touching anything.*” The impression/act-out becomes an extension of the premise, which is much funnier than announcing, “Look at me doing voices!”

**Wrong Way:**

*“Anyone see Mike Tyson being interviewed the other day. He sounds like this, ‘I’m gonna knock this guy out!’”*

**Right Way:**

Check out this Dana Carvey joke comparing his young son to fighter Mike Tyson:

*“My kid gets into a fight with his brother and I asked him ‘What’s the matter?’ and he sounds like Mike Tyson (act-out of his kid as Tyson:) ‘You know what I’m saying...if he’s going to take my Power Ranger, I’m going to knock him out.’”*

*Now, let’s try your impressions.*

## **EXERCISE 43: ADDING IMPRESSIONS TO YOUR ACT**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 43: Impressions**

*“Okay, so where do I drop them in exactly?”*

Here's how to work your talents as an impressionist into a successful stand-up act.

1. Make a list of celebrity impressions you do.
2. Remove anyone who's dead or no longer in the public consciousness.
3. Now, go back to the jokes you wrote in Exercise 18: Practice Mix Session.

Take one of your existing jokes and tag on an impression. Use lead-ins like: *"What if..."* and *"That's just like..."*

4. Revisit your jokes from Exercise 19: Family Jokes Using Mixes. See if you can add a phrase like, *"Imagine my mother as..."* and then do an impression/act-out of a famous person playing your mother.

*Voila! You should have at least one new gem for your "My Act" folder. Ready to try writing a few observational jokes?*



# Observational Humor: “What’s the deal with...”

So far, you’ve built your act on topics that are personal to you. But there’s an entire category called observational comedy that focuses on the world around you. Observational comedy usually starts with:

- *“Did you ever notice...?”*
- *“What’s the deal with...?”*
- *“Do you ever wonder why...?”*

The comic recounts something universally familiar, but in a unique way with details the audience hasn’t noticed.

“I don’t go, ‘I’m gonna write a joke.’ I just go through the world and see stuff. It’s like I exercised the part of my mind of noticing things, to the point where I’m now noticing things without even trying to notice them.”

—Steven Wright

For instance, on the minutia of making and eating a salad:

“I’m tired of salad. Have you noticed that it’s too exhausting, because you have to get all your

ingredients, mix it together, then dress the salad. Then, you go and eat the salad, and you have to make a copy of the salad on your fork. 'All right, I need, lettuce, tomato, onion, mushroom...' It's like making fourteen salads. That's probably why at a restaurant they're like, 'You still working on that salad?' 'You're damn right I'm still working on this salad!'

**—Demetri Martin**

The tricky part about these jokes is if the observation is too obvious, it won't be funny. And if it's something too oblique, the jokes end to dead silence with, "*Well...I guess it's just me who noticed.*"

The emotion behind observational jokes is usually perplexity or confusion about a small detail of everyday life. The humor comes out of *launching an investigation* into those details.

“Have you noticed we never do married activities on a date? If we acted married on a first date, we'd never see each other again.

(Act-out) 'How was your date with Katy?'

(Act out) 'Awful...we balanced the checkbook and cleaned out the garage. She won't sleep with me and I don't know what I did.'

**—Dean Lewis**

“What’s the deal with these LA hipsters? You see these guys with ‘Mork & Mindy’ suspenders, a tattoo of a parallelogram, and they can’t light a pilot light. They can barely wave. They’re like, (act-out) ‘Hey... I’m Beowulf...’ ‘Hey...I’m Nathaniel...’ Okay, I’m sure your parents named you Nathan, and in college you were probably called Nate Dogg. Nathaniel’s like the name of a ghost. Not an emaciated barista with a Mr. Pringles mustache.

—**Natasha Leggero**

“You ever notice how hard it is to get a twenty-something dude you met on a dating app to put on a condom? It’s like trying to get a five-year-old to put a jacket on over his Halloween costume. He’s like (actout) ‘Noooooooooooo! You’re gonna ruin it!’

—**Taylor Tomlinson**

Very often the premise of an observational joke is a one-liner:

“Everyone likes rice. Rice is great when you’re hungry, and you want 2,000 of something.

—**Mitch Hedberg**

*Now let’s explore your world of observational humor.*

# EXERCISE 44: CREATING OBSERVATIONAL JOKES

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## Comedy Bible Workbook > > Exercises > Exercise 44: Observational Jokes

### Comedy Buddy Exercise

Observational jokes are rarely created sitting at your computer. Rather, they're the organic result of you noticing and reflecting on seemingly mundane parts of life. Your life.

For the next three days, take notes on all the little things you notice about people, places and things. Especially take note of what you find perplexing. Or things you find that are hard, weird, scary, or stupid about what you notice.

Put your topics through Stand-up Structure:



Now, rant and rave with your Comedy Buddy and run through at least ten observational jokes getting to an act-out, a turn, a dialogue joke, or a comparison.

*In the final chapter on expanding your material to sixty minutes is a way to create new material, not with your Comedy Buddy, but with an audience.*

# Riffing New Material Onstage

One of the best ways to write new material is creating it live onstage. Because when you *do* get a laugh, an opportunity arises to get more laughs by *riffing* after the *tag*. For instance, in this joke Sabrina Jalees gets in a joke and then riffs her way to create a new joke.

*“It was scary for them (my girlfriend’s parents) because I was the first lesbian coming to their house. They probably expected me to go, (miming kicking in the door) ‘Boom! I’ve stolen your daughter’s heart! And I’ve built a deck out front. It’s a lesbian courtesy deck. These are your grandchildren. They’re cats. Yes, twenty-five of them.”* (laugh and then add on riff) *They were shocked at first, but her parents love me. I know her father loves me because he took me hunting and he didn’t shoot me* (second laugh).”

Riffing is like ranting and raving, but this time you’re doing it on the spot, live in front of an audience. Any time a joke lands is a perfect moment to take a chance and riff new material. In this heightened moment, you can create your best material.

Every joke you write has three to five more jokes hidden within it—guaranteed. These nuggets appear in the spaces between jokes, and when you improvise new material—*riff*—on the spot.

“Most of my comedy writing happens through improvisation on stage; doing it in the moment.”

Going up with an idea and fleshing it out over time on stage and in front of people until it becomes a full bit.

—Marc Maron

It takes some finesse to know the right conditions, but when you feel that connection, go for it. Riffing creates the *comic's high*.

☞ Sometimes I write down notes about what I want to talk about and start trying to flesh them out with the toing and froing of the chitchat, but it's still tricky. It's so much easier to find that on stage. Most of it is ad-libbed at some point.

—Eddie Izzard

Todd Barry works the crowd every chance he gets. Notice how he turns a spontaneous moment, calling out a woman in the audience for texting, into a routine he now uses in his show.

*"I asked a woman, 'Are you texting?'"*

*She says, 'I'm not texting, I'm Googling you.'"*

*"Googling me? What are you trying to find out? If maybe I'm doing a show in town or something?' 'Oh, wow, this guy does stand-up comedy. That's a coincidence. I wonder if he's funny. Ooh, there's a clip...he's funny! I have to catch him live sometime. I'll check his tour dates... Ooh, tonight...Oh that's really close by.'"*

Allow yourself to riff onstage and when you listen back to your recording, you just might find new material.

## EXERCISE 45: RIFFING ONSTAGE

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > My Act > Polish Jokes by Topics

Now's the time to be daring and riff in front of a live audience. Next time you prepare your act, determine a spot in it to riff. This means *not* planning what to say, but leaving yourself open to possibilities of finding something new in the moment. Again, record your act, listen to the new material and enter it in your *Comedy Bible Workbook*. With riffing, sometimes an off-handed comment can turn into a chunk. Look up your original joke and add anything that got a laugh to expand your polished jokes.

Let's review.

In this section where we focused on creating sixty minutes of new material, you have:

- Poked fun at yourself using the self-mocking formula.
- Written half-and-half mash-ups.
- Created comparison jokes.
- Tried your hand at dialogue act-outs and mixes.
- Scanned the headlines for political and topical material.
- Setup your impressions without sounding hack.
- Found humor through observation.

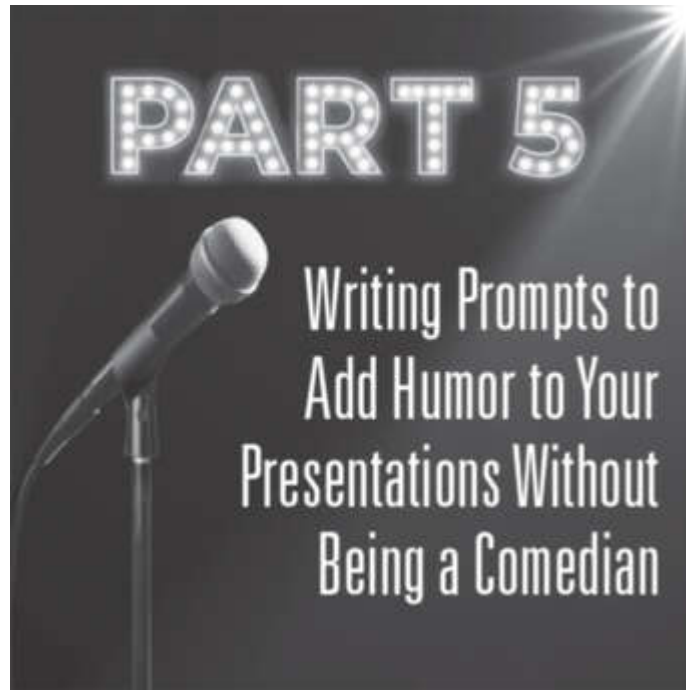
- Riffed new material onstage.

Remember that sometimes on paper your material is hilarious, but dies onstage. And sometimes, an offhanded comment you said onstage is killer. Perform new material for several different audiences to get a sense of what works and what needs changing.

Congratulations! Keep writing and keep performing stand-up.

*For those of you who are speakers or Toastmasters, this next section provides writing prompts specifically designed to add laughs to your speeches and stories.*





In the past few years, I've written comedy material for physicians, CEOs, politicians, and other *unfunny* professions. Why? Because when they speak, they want their audiences to stay awake. If you're a speaker or a Toastmaster, it is not a suggestion to add humor to your speeches and stories—it is mandatory.

“There are two kinds of speakers: funny and unemployed.

**—Overheard at a National Speaker's Association meeting**

The next four exercises show you how to add humor to any topic, no matter how serious or depressing it is:

The following is an excerpt from my book, ***The Message of You: Turn Your Life Story into a Money-Making Speaking Career.***

There is nothing funny about this topic: “Genocide in Darfur.”

A speaker came to me needing a punch-up for his speech to encourage volunteerism in Darfur. The purpose of his speech was to recruit volunteers. But when he spoke, it was so depressing that people walked out instead of signing up. It all changed when I added humor to his talk. “It’s hard asking people to volunteer. It’s like, ‘Hey, do you want to work long hours, not get paid, and get depressed?’ Nobody’s going, ‘Whoo hoo, where do I sign up?’” He got a laugh and ended up with volunteers.

No matter how unfunny your topic is, there are always places to get laughs. I highly suggest that you write out your story or speech so it makes sense. Then use the following exercise to get laughs. Where you find laughs in your speech or story might surprise you.

# The Reluctant Admission

A big turnoff to an audience is coming across as a know-it-all, even if you are an expert and actually do know everything. There's something very funny about an expert doing light-hearted self-mocking, admitting that they aren't perfect. And even more funny and endearing when the honesty comes from a respected professional.

In this exercise, "The Reluctant Admission," you make a big, bold statement of *truth* and then *reluctantly* admit that you were caught telling a lie. Here's the formula and notice that throughout the sequence, you'll need to repeat the same word in each sentence.

It goes like this:

1. Lie with confidence and ***conviction***

"I really have a *high* degree of education so you can trust my advice..."

2. Admit to the lie with **hesitation**

"Well, it isn't exactly, you know, a *high* degree like a master's..."

3. Admit to the lie with ***embarrassment*** and tell the truth

"Well, actually I'm a master at getting *high*."

4. Say the *tag* loudly like, "***Anyway!***" or "***Moving on!***"

Repeated word is “high.”

## **Anyway!**

The beauty of the reluctant admission is that there is no limit on how many times you can use it. Use it during any story, or whenever you overexaggerate a statistic or a result.

Here’s a *reluctant admission* I used in Canada around the time Trump was elected, when everyone outside the United States thought we’d lost our minds.

1. Lie with confidence and *conviction*: “*Well, you know, we all have so much in common. You’re Canadian. I’m Canadian.*”
2. Admit to the lie with *hesitation*. “*Well... I actually wasn’t born in Canada...*”
3. Admit to the lie with *embarrassment* and tell the truth: “*Well, I just tell people I’m from Canada whenever someone mentions Trump.*”
4. Say loudly, “*Anyway!*”

The repeated word is “Canada/Canadian.”

If you’re a Toastmaster, this is an excellent way to get laughs throughout your stories.

**Become an International Toastmasters Star**

Toastmasters is an international organization of more than 240,000 members that hosts speaking and humor competitions. I've had the honor of speaking at many of their conferences as well as coaching some of their members to winning awards. Although the focus of Toastmasters is giving speeches, it's a safe, supportive environment to get over stage fright, get feedback, and maximize your storytelling skills.

The most important element of this technique is the *delivery*. You *must* state the lie confidently, without a hint that it's untrue. Then you *reluctantly* admit what you said was technically not true, as if to try and fudge your lie. Finally, you say quickly, as if embarrassed being caught in the lie, acting as if it's unimportant, "*Well, actually... (something totally different).*" The delivery of a loud "*Anyway...!*" will extend the laugh.

The repetition of the *topic* of the lie in each segment of the joke gets the laugh. For example:

*"I lost 120 pounds."*

(Next, you say a little quieter)

*"Well, I didn't exactly lose 120 pounds all at once."*

(And then even softer, maybe looking down at the ground)

*"Well, actually I just lost and gained the same ten pounds twelve times, that's 120 pounds. Anyway..."*

The reluctant admission technique is a natural for speakers delivering serious content, because the audience isn't expecting it. The laugh

reengages them as you get right back into the serious material. It also works well for telling a story.

*Let's try writing some reluctant admissions.*

## EXERCISE 46: RELUCTANT ADMISSION

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### Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 46: My Reluctant Admissions

***“Does my reluctant admission have to be embarrassing?”***

Not necessarily. What *real world* thing about yourself can be turned into a reluctant admission? Job? Birthplace? Look through your topics, subtopics, and microtopics in Exercises 7 and 8, and pick five characteristics you can exaggerate and turn into a reluctant admission. Write at least two versions of the reluctant admission method for each of those five characteristics. When finished, move your best material from your exercise folder into your “Jokes in Progress by Topic” and the winners to your “My Act” folder.

Remember:

- Delivery is key in creating the joke.
- Use higher volume levels for the lie, and lower for the truth.
- Do the entire joke as a quick throwaway in the middle of a story.

*Done? Good! Now read on to learn about terminology twists.*

# Terminology Twists

The *terminology twists* joke method is great for stand-up comics and speakers who want to create custom jokes for a corporate audience. In a terminology twist, you name a term, usually one or two words long, that's familiar to your audience, say it's a word from another culture/ language, and then give it a funny definition.

It goes like this:

*“You may not know this, but (insert word) \_\_\_\_\_ is actually a (name of language) \_\_\_\_\_ term, meaning (funny definition) \_\_\_\_\_.”*

Let's say you're performing in front of a group of entrepreneurs. Here are some options using this formula:

*“You may not know this, but entrepreneur is actually a French term, meaning, ‘I work in my underwear.’”*

or...

*“You may not know this, but Powerpoint is an ancient Sanskrit term, meaning ‘Oh, kill me now!’”*

Robin Williams used this method quite often. For example:

*“You may not know this, but divorce is a Latin word meaning, ‘ripping a man's genitals out through his wallet.’”*

*Now, let's twist some of your own terminology.*

## **EXERCISE 47: TERMINOLOGY TWIST**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 47: My Terminology Twists**

1. Pick a common phrase, word, or term.

If you're working a comedy club, the term can include any words from your current:

- Occupation.
- Ethnic background.
- Heritage.
- Relationship status.
- Hobbies, interests.

If you're performing in front of a corporate audience, name one or more of these:

- A frustrating new computer program.
- An unpopular bonus plan.
- An annoying company system or procedure.
- Recurring meetings, training, and conferences.

Words and phrases delivering the most laughs are things a lot of attendees are frustrated with or complaining about.



2. Next, claim that this term has a different meaning in a foreign language. So, pick a language: Latin, Yiddish, Farsi, ancient Egyptian, your native tongue, etc.
3. Make up a definition for the word/phrase reflecting everyone's frustrations, hidden thoughts or irritation with this topic.

In your *Comedy Bible Workbook*, "Exercise 47: Terminology Twists," make a list of terms your audience would find annoying, or a list of *people*, *places* or *things* that annoy you.

Then, next to each item, write what's annoying about it as an *act-out*.

So, rather than:

The term *networking* and your annoyance that *everyone's being fake*, make it funny by writing something you can act out, such as you see below, in your *Comedy Bible Workbook*:

TERMS	Act-Out Annoyances and Frustrations
NETWORKING	I'M PRETENDING TO BE INTERESTED SO YOU HIRE ME FOR SOMETHING.

Once you have the list, try each of your terms in this formula:

"You may not know this, but (insert term) \_\_\_\_\_ is actually a (insert language) \_\_\_\_\_ term, meaning (funny definition that includes a mutual frustration and act-out) \_\_\_\_\_."

**Tip:** The key to this joke is in its *performance*. The setup "You may not know this, but (term) is a Latin word meaning..." is short and delivered

deadpan-serious. The *payoff* needs to be longer and *louder*. You can also punch your hands out to the audience as if to say, “*Am I right?*” to get an extra laugh.

Losing track of your jokes? Is your homemade workbook a mess? Why not download *The Comedy Bible Workbook*?

# Annoying Acronyms

*“Judy, I’m not going to become a stand-up comic, I just need to get laughs as a speaker. How do I do that?”*

If you do corporate gigs as a comic or as a speaker, then this exercise is great for you. All corporations have excessive acronyms. And these acronyms create another constructive method for adding material.

The annoying acronym joke goes like this:

*“You may not know this but... (insert acronym) \_\_\_\_\_ actually stands for (insert your funny acronym)\_\_\_\_\_.*

Comic Brandi Denise uses this method in a joke about airport security:

*“(TSA is stupid...) They have the most useless job ever; people bring in weapons and kill people—you think that TSA is taking their guns? No. But, you know what they are taking? Your water, your lotion, your perfume, your Preparation H. Whatever is going on in your life. That’s why I think TSA stands for Throw Shit Away. That’s all they do. ‘Hi, I’m TSA. I’m here to throw your shit away, step on through!’”*

Notice how she used the annoying acronym method in a joke and ended with an act-out.

More examples:

*“You may not know this but...Ford actually stands for Fix Or Repair Daily.”*

*“You may not know this, but...math actually stands for Mental Abuse To Humans!”*

*“Did you know that single actually stands for ‘So I’m Never Getting Laid, Ever!’”*

*Let’s write some acronym jokes in the next exercise.*

## **EXERCISE 48: ANNOYING ACRONYMS**

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### **Comedy Bible Workbook > Exercises > Exercise 48: Annoying Acronyms**

When working a corporate gig, get a detailed list of acronyms the company uses, and find out the annoyances related to their office’s daily grind. Or make a list of acronyms that personally annoy you, such as:

- Sports teams/associations.
- Government agencies.
- Schools.
- Cities.
- Countries.
- An organization you feel serves no purpose.

Now describe the annoyance matching the letters in the acronym.

Complete the table in your *Comedy Bible Workbook* with at least five acronyms for existing entities and their “new” meanings:

Acronyms	Annoyances starting with same letters

Put your material into this joke structure:

*Did you know that (insert acronym) actually stands for (insert annoyance with same letters)?*

*If you're a speaker or storyteller, it will be scary taking a risk to get a laugh. But once you do it, you'll be hooked as there's nothing better than having an entire audience laugh. Try it...you'll like it.*



Congratulations! You've completed this book.

You're about to hear something you might consider strange. Now that you've learned and applied all the rules of stand-up—it's time to *break them*. Take chances onstage! Be daring! Take the training wheels off! Because becoming a star is learning your craft, *then* taking risks. Go outside the book and try things *your* way. Ride your passion. Be in the moment. Be present. You've learned the rules—*now break them!*

# Remember Your Comedy Vision?

I started this book asking you to think about your vision for success. For many of us, success means fame: making money, signing autographs, and taking selfies with strangers. In other words, being a celebrity. The problem is that vision delays the celebration of success to a distant future. That type of vision can, and will, add to feelings of not being good enough in the here and now.

In my twenties and thirties I was, by every standard, successful. I'd quit my job as a high school teacher to do comedy full-time, and I was making a good living, booked forty-six weeks out of the year. I was headlining clubs, acting in commercials, and performing on over one hundred TV shows, and I appeared in four (count 'em, four) cable comedy specials. I had a manager, an agent, and was flown across the country to audition for *Saturday Night Live*. TV pilots came my way, and I signed with the legendary writer, producer, and director, Carl Reiner, to be in a show he wrote, along with Jay Leno and Andy Kaufman. All this exposure enabled me to buy a home by the beach and watch my mother beam with pride when someone asked for my autograph after my show in Vegas.

But, looking back, I realized that I never *felt* successful. I only focused on the parts I didn't get, the shows where I bombed, and things outside my control, like another comic getting a gig I felt I deserved.

After my mother died, during an especially difficult gig at a Long Island, New York club filled with drunken hecklers, something snapped. I

walked off the stage, left the tour, and went home to reset my life.

I decided to do something conventional, get a job, and quickly learned I had no marketable skills. Undeterred, I rented an office to *practice* going to work—as if it were performance art.

Deposited in my brain was an untapped wealth of knowledge, and because of this, I felt writing a book might be a good idea. Guess what? I wrote the book and it was promptly rejected by not one, not twelve, but *fifty-nine agents*. Then lucky agent number sixty, Annette Wells, believed in the book and represented it. And the wonderful Chuck Adams at Random House took a big risk and published it. Oh...and there was one other person who liked the book enough to have me on her show: Oprah Winfrey. But as her guest, I was so nervous I mixed up my words and felt like a loser.

Fast forward to 2005, a student of mine changed my attitude about what success means, and it gave me peace. You see, the book I'd written led to performing at corporate events and starting my own business teaching stand-up classes. One day I had a class full of students and they were figuring out their authentic topics. "I'm divorced! I'm fat! Whoo hoo!" Out of the blue, a frail looking older woman yelled, "I have cancer!" I hesitated before speaking, then told her that might not be a good topic for laughs. She stood up and said, "Judy, this illness has taken away my health and so much more. I'll be damned if it's going to take away my sense of humor!" So, we began writing jokes about her illness. When our class showcased at the Hollywood Improv, she tore the place apart joking about The Big C. "Did you see my car in the parking lot? Lose weight now—ask me how!" While in remission, she wrote a book called *Healing with Humor*.

That was the first time in my life I truly felt successful because I realized that my success, and also my purpose in life, is determined by my impact on the lives of others.

As my friend, the late comic Lotus Weinstock, once said, "I just want to be rich and famous so I can say being rich and famous wasn't it."



A future time when you'll have "made it" doesn't exist. There will never be laurels to rest on, and no brass rings to grab.

Ask yourself this question: *What would it take to feel successful today?*

Well for one, you've just finished a very difficult book. Do you feel that success, or are you thinking:

"Well...I skipped a lot of exercises."

"I didn't get a Comedy Buddy."

"I didn't get that gig."

My advice? Look at what you *did* do! Celebrate finding that turn, writing that joke, getting that one laugh.

Rather than focusing on the two people in the audience who didn't laugh, appreciate the people who *did*. Looking at what you didn't do, and the missed opportunities, is a trap door opening to the evil twins of depression and anxiety.

*Celebrate* your wins, no matter how small they seem. As your attention shifts to what *is working*, and how your work is impacting others, you *will* feel more and more successful, and that will create more success. That's my promise to you.

# Acknowledgments

OK, I'll admit to you, I'm a procrastinator. I thought I could knock this book out in a few months. Cut to two years later. Writing a book such as this is nothing that anyone can do alone.

The brilliant writer and TV producer, *SJ Hodges* started things off by giving me amazing ideas and editing the first part of the book. I will always appreciate your contribution to my life. I write garbage, give it to you and you send it back with me saying, "Yes! That is what I wanted to say, but better."

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