

# HOW TO WRITE COMEDY CHARACTERS

*A guide to the processes  
used by  
professional screenwriters*

• **By Paul Milham** •

# **HOW TO WRITE COMEDY CHARACTERS**

A guide to the professional methods of Sitcom writing

**By Paul Milham**

**Copyright © 2011 by Paul Milham**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system.

# **TABLE OF CONTENT**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## **FOREWORD**

If you've ever made someone laugh then you can write comedy

## **PART 1: Where to start...**

What is the difference between a comedy character and a character in drama?

Pre-occupations and Obsessions

Pre-occupations and Obsessions come from your own experience.

Investigating Pre-occupations and Obsessions.

Looking for clues in language

Interrogate your character.

Using monologues.

## **PART 2 : Adding dimensions to your characters**

Can one dimensional characters be funny?

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

Adding more dimensions

Scenes are boxing matches

Further Conflicts

Final design of your character

Putting it all together and moving forward

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Paul Milham** is a screenwriter and lecturer in scriptwriting specialising in comedy and drama. In 2000 he had his first sitcom, '*Theo*', developed by Alomo Productions, a major British production company responsible for the ground breaking sitcom '*Birds of a Feather*.' Having trained in Bournemouth University, Paul has also spent time working as a Script Coordinator for Sky One's '*Dream Team*' He is currently developing a new comedy drama '*The Real Kathy Haydn*,' which can be found at his website [www.kathyhaydn.com](http://www.kathyhaydn.com).

In between his own projects, Paul runs many successful and highly sought after comedy writing workshops in major cities throughout the UK. With a keen eye for script-editing and a vast knowledge of the industry, Paul also works one-to-one with writers and directors to push their screenplays to the next level through a variety of different development packages.

For more information or for one to one coaching, script reports, courses or mentoring please contact Paul at [pmilham@gmail.com](mailto:pmilham@gmail.com)

"What Paul did for my writing and comedy characters has been amazing. His industry experience has given me a step by step recipe for creating amazing comedic characters. After taking his course and using his development services I was able to take my ideas, which existed as notes on paper, and turn them into a script and then a filmed pilot sketch show. Absolutely no chance this could have been done without Paul's one to one mentoring and advice."

**Ryan McCrostie, London**

## FOREWORD

### *If you've ever made someone laugh then you can write comedy*

Firstly let me say thank you for buying this book. I had my first sitcom accepted around the age of twenty one. I had heard horror stories about how new writers suffered endless rejection for their scripts but, somehow, I managed to bypass this agony and get solid professional interest and an agent early on in my career. I use the word 'somehow' as, at the time, I really did not have a clue what I was doing as a writer. In fact, the production company, Alomo, sent back my script with a letter that said my characters were flat, my storyline was nonexistent, my idea was unoriginal BUT it made them laugh and that aspect alone got me my foot in the door. Initially it wasn't what I expected. No one opened their chequebooks and paid me any development money. In fact, all that was on offer with a five minute chat about my work. This five minute chat was largely promising but non committal on their part. They offered me the chance to redraft and resubmit, giving me reasons as to why my comedy didn't work. When I did take heed of their advice and sent back a second draft they (after another month's consideration) gave me some more feedback and more notes on how to improve.

These exchanges went on for a good few months. I felt a little like I was bugging the staff at Alomo but the scripts went backwards and forwards until I slipped into a steady development process without even knowing it. Two years and a lot of hard work, later I found I had their full attention. Alomo had met with the BBC who were keen on my work and the consideration they gave me seemed more regular and more committal. It was then I received my first cheque and started to gain the interest of writing agents.

Looking back at this whole process now, my time at Alomo was the happiest period of my life. All I was doing was cracking jokes, the same silly cheap gags that got me in trouble at school, and people were paying me money to do it. I am proud that this did not go to my head and I was never anything but grateful for the opportunity.

This was, however, the start of my writing career and it was only by making a million and one mistakes did I start to understand the intricate

processes of writing narrative comedy. I was amazed at how meticulous the methods were; I remember spending a fifteen minute phone conversation with my script editor discussing whether we could cut the word ‘or’ out of a line of dialogue to make the script tighter. The lesson here was that nothing is left to chance, not one word. There are rules to creating interesting characters and stories and I had a lot to learn. I was slow on the uptake but did finally understand the fundamentals. It felt like learning to ride a bike or play the piano; once you have mastered the skills, it becomes second nature. These practices are what I have tried to put into this book; methods that work in order to get you to a place where comedy writing comes naturally.

I believe that anyone can write comedy. If you can make someone laugh at the pub then you can make them laugh in a script. All you have to do is harness the way that you did it and you can repeat this success over and over.

Whether you’re a natural comic or dipping your toes into the world of comedy for the first time, there are going to be a lot of times where you are sitting in front of a computer with your brain devoid of thoughts. This is writer’s block and the enemy of every scriptwriter I know. It is my belief that at this moment you should retreat from the glaring screen and try and solve the problem from a different angle. If you are struggling to think of jokes then it could be that you need to work on your characters in greater depth. The golden rule is that a good character should tell you how they will behave without you having to ‘create’ anything. This is the rule I stick to and refer to often in this book.

It is, therefore, with the creation of comedy characters that I have started my write up of professional processes. Characters are central to the success of comedy; we laugh with them and at them, we feel empathy towards them, we care for them, hate them and love them; they are pivotal and the very foundation of an outstanding sitcom. You should not be putting pen to paper on a script until you know your characters as well as you do your immediate family. This eBook will help you to get to that point through a series of fun and, hopefully, insightful exercises.

Happy writing.

**Paul Milham**

## PART 1: Where to start...

### *What is the difference between a comedy character and a character in drama?*

Like people, comedy characters come in all shapes and sizes; some are inherently ignorant or stupid, some are bossy and authoritarian, some are sarcastic and witty though all are, to some degree, loveable; after all, they require us to spend at least half an hour per week in their company so no matter how harebrained their schemes, the audience have to route for them.

- In comedy there are generally two types of characters;
- The (arguably) sane voice in a mad world: ***Frasier, Blackadder, Victor Meldew, Father Ted, Gavin and Stacey.***
- The (arguably) insane voice in a normal world: ***Roseanne, Edina Monsoon, Linda La Hughes, Michael Scott***

This formula is not water tight as characters can often change sides as the story requires. In US sitcom *Friends*, Joey can switch from playing the fool (when creating a 'silly putty foreskin' for an audition requiring an uncircumcised actor) to being the only sane voice in the ensemble (when trying to convince Rachel and Phoebe to cease playing childish games with closeted couple Monica and Chandler). In the case of Joey, the former situation is his natural playground and, aligned with audience expectations, he is generally written as the comedic foil.

The 'sane versus insane' situations used in comedy are one of the building blocks of this genre so it is worth, when designing your characters, thinking which of the two scenarios will best fit them.

Though the outrageous and exaggerated actions and reactions of comedy characters are what identify them as 'comic,' the techniques we use to create them are very similar to those used in constructing dramatic characters. All characters, regardless of genre, are generally three dimensional; they have emotions, fears, loves, hang-ups, flaws and strengths. They experience pleasure, pain, struggles, conflicts and passions in the same way as any realised dramatic character but what makes them comical are their reactions



and the methods they use to handle crisis. In a crime drama we might expect a detective to solve a murder using process and ingenuity and to rebel against a ‘play it by the rules’ boss in order to crack the case. In a crime *comedy*, however, we would expect the detective to solve the case using a ludicrous undercover disguise whilst trying to manipulate a psychotic control-freak boss into giving him a raise. In both situations the detective character is similarly motivated (to solve the crime and impress the boss) but in the comical version the stakes, motivations and actions are just exaggerated to create humour. Exaggerating scenarios is a simple way of creating comedy but we still need the fundamental building blocks of a good solid character in order to apply the techniques of comedy.

## ***Pr-eoccupations and Obsessions***

Let us go back to our analysis of sitcom ‘*Friends*.’ This is an ensemble piece where the six main protagonists all negotiate the challenges and pitfalls of living in a bustling New York City (with a general focus on romance and relationships). The global success of this show does lay with its clearly defined characters who each have their own quirks and foibles as well as, importantly here, pre-occupations. A preoccupation is an outcome or focus that becomes the character’s overriding motivation. In *Friends*, Ross is preoccupied with science, Joey with food and sex, Phoebe with alternative lifestyles, Rachel with fashion, Chandler with his own short comings and Monica with cleaning. In drama these character quirks remain as pre-occupations whilst in comedy they become obsessions. Monica is so obsessed with cleanliness that she often cites housework as akin to a party. Her obsession manifests itself in every situation she finds herself in; it is both her strength and her Achilles heel. Of course, as a single character trait ‘cleanliness’ does not have the longevity to hold the audience’s interest over several seasons so the writer’s have broadened this basic obsession. Not only is she fanatical about cleaning, she is similarly fixated on ‘organisation’ and ‘control’. Later on in the series, this manifests itself as ‘competitiveness’ and ‘winning’. As a result, the umbrella term for Monica would be ‘neurosis’ but whatever adjectives we wish to use to describe her these overriding character traits dictate how she reacts to the situations that she and her friends encounter.

Once we know a character's obsession, it is very easy to begin to write comedy for them. In fact, we can place Monica in any situation and she will now tell *us* how she will react instead of us writing for her. For example, if Monica was walking into a bar, her obsession dictates that she will begin to focus on the cleanliness of the place; the lipstick marks on unwashed glasses and the spots of chewing gum tacked onto the bar stools. Her obsession is so amplified that she will possibly start to give the barman tips on how to remove beer stains or maybe plan a cleaning rota for the staff to help them keep on top of this issue. We also know that she is competitive so it may be that she brings in her own cleaning equipment to prove to the manager that there is a better way of organising the upkeep of the bar than he is currently employing. The beauty of a well crafted ensemble piece is that if she walked into that same bar with Joey (obsessed with food and sex), he might be sidetracked by the menu of pastrami sandwiches or the cute, buxom blonde sitting alone in the corner. At this point Monica and Joey would be at odds, both looking for different outcomes out of the same situation causing intense conflict between them. They would look for more elaborate ways of getting what they want and more chaos would ensue. Joey may have ordered a sandwich but be left waiting for hours whilst Monica checks the kitchen for signs of poor hygiene. Joey may start chatting up the blonde who, it turns out, is the manageress and is insulted by Monica's harsh judgements about her establishment. Joey would then have to placate Monica in order to guarantee a positive reaction when he asks the girl out on a date.

This is when writing comedy is at its most enjoyable, when your brain is racing with ideas as to how this simple situation could play out and when you have a seemingly endless supply of possibilities. Writing comedy is thankless unless you have put in the work to create and get to know your characters. If you do this, to use a cliché, the script will write itself.

***Pre-occupations and Obsessions come from your own experience.***

A couple of weeks ago I was relaxing with a cup of tea on a Sunday morning when I received a phone call from an old family friend. To put this into perspective, I had not seen or heard from her in about ten years, so a phone call like this was curious to say the least. The unexpectedness of her

contact led me to think it could only be bad news; that there had been a death or worse. The chirpy, tuneful, shrillness of her voice, however, soon laid those morbid visions to rest. In fact, my friend was calling to tell me about a wine tasting evening she had been on. Her excitement levels about it were pretty high. It seems that she had got talking to this wine connoisseur who had turned up to the same event; a gentleman called Marvin who knew every fermentation process, every ingredient and every wine descriptive adjective known to the wine drinking man. As he talked he dribbled wine, out of his mouth and even his nostrils whilst his bloodshot eyes were the colour of Tapena Rose. She excitedly told me how he disparaged everyone's individual taste buds and called one woman 'pathetic' and 'working class' for not tasting a hint of woody nutmeg in an 'Alicante Bouschet'. He did not believe in spitting out the grape because he believed the aroma would continue to massage his body from the inside. After an hour of pontificating he suddenly vomited on the shoes of the woman promoting the Pinot Gris and stumbled out of the building like some a pot belly drunkard from a tavern.

I laughed, almost whole-heartedly, at this story. It was pretty funny as she told it, a strange opening conversation from someone I hadn't spoken to for over a decade, but amusing nonetheless. Then came the point of her recital. Cornered into admitting it to be a story of great humour my friend then said to me *'I'm only telling you this because I thought it would make a really good sitcom character for you.'*

I have to say this is one of my pet hates and possibly quite unreasonably so. When people meet someone funny they have an overwhelming urge to tell me in the hopes that I might immortalise their meeting on the television. In this case, she also followed her comedy offering with a sentence that secretly makes my blood boil; *'I tell you what. I'll let you use that character but I want 50%.'* Of course, she is only excited and trying to support my writing career but the point is this; people who do not write do not understand the workload that goes into creating comedy. In a strange way I am always insulted when friends and family believe that fifty percent of the work is about going to a vineyard to get pissed. For my fifty percent I would have to create characters, stories, scripts, re-drafts, synopsis, character profiles and script packages. The balance is completely in her favour and to make matters worse... now my tea was cold. I am polite, however, and congratulate her on

her witty story and eagle eye. I finish up the conversation and say goodbye.

One week later, I receive another phone call from her. This time it is to check up on me. *'How's our sitcom coming along'* she asks... *I've thought of a great name for it... 'Winos'... I'll let you have that for free.'* So now, not only is she asking for a fifty percent share in a sitcom I am only writing out of politeness, she is also expecting results within seven days. She would have made a great producer! Unfortunately I am too nice for my own good and have always had a problem saying 'No' to people... I'm now stuck on Act One, Goddammit!

The problem here is that it is difficult, unexciting and, frankly, impossible to write about people that you don't know or have not experienced meeting. No doubt this wine drinking egomaniac is pure comedy gold but unless the memory exists in my head it is hard for me to find the motivation to want to write about him.

I have conducted quite a lot of script mentoring positions in my career and one of the most frequently asked questions concerns plagiarism. More specifically, if my mentee talks at length about a great idea they've had, what is stopping me stealing it. The answer is, no matter how brilliant, original and funny I find other people's ideas, I believe that no one can write them better than they can. No matter how much you learn about the mechanics and techniques of scriptwriting *you are always the master of the experiences that you have had.*

***No one can write what you know, what you find funny and  
what you have experienced better than you!***

When coming up with comedy characters, pre-occupations and obsessions, therefore, the best place to start looking is on your own doorstep. The process involves analysing the people you know; your friends and family, your co-workers, acquaintances from your past, even the woman who serves you at the local convenience store. In fact, anyone you meet has the potential to become a great comic creation as long as you know how to extract and manipulate the humorous aspects of their personalities. Your best method here is to stereotype, that is, find an aspect of your subject's personality and make it their overriding feature. Think of what they are pre-occupied with

and make it their obsession.

## ***\*\* A Case Study \*\****

Through a 'friend of a friend' I have recently got to know a charismatic man who has joined my comrades on several social occasions. For the sake of respect and privacy I shall call him James. James started his career as an accountant working in a large firm in central London. Through luck and hard work he progressed in his career to positions of high responsibility and status, hence, to say James is financially secure is an understatement. James goes through twenty pound notes like most of us do toilet tissue. Nowadays he works as a freelancer taking on wealthy, professional clients. Meetings that previously took place in sterile looking offices have now been relocated to the eighteenth hole of the golf course. James is cash and time rich. He spends his money on the best that life has to offer; cars, gadgets and women. No experience is outside his grasp and, as a result the guy has lived his twenties in a hedonistic whirlwind. The problem now is that James gets bored incredibly easily. When he comes out for a quiet night at a bar or drinks round a friend's house he cannot help but look for opportunities to be outrageous and turn every scenario into reckless profligacy. This pre-occupation with indulgence has led him into a number of wild situations; from blowing ten grand at a casino to buying a houseboat on a drunken whim, James is never short of a story or two.

Yet what if, however, this wasn't James' pre-occupation or minor personality quirk? What if this was the guy's comedy obsession? What if he entered every situation looking for opportunities to indulge himself? Who would it annoy? Where would it leave him?

By taking this one personality foible and turning it into an obsession it is easy to see how James is starting to be transformed into a comedy character. If James were to walk into a restaurant he is going to get more drunk than anyone else and be the one dancing on the tables. James may even set fire to the brandy in his mouth just to see if it hurts. If James went to the supermarket he would buy fifty crates of champagne and a box of one hundred condoms just to see the look on the checkout assistant's face. Of course, this is now moving further away from the reality of the subject I have chosen but by looking into the obvious psyche of one of my acquaintances I

have now come up with my first rule that governs the behaviour of my character... *James will always look for pleasure and excitement in any given situation, no matter the consequences.*

\*\*\*

## ***Investigating Pre-occupations and Obsessions.***

Unless you are a hermit, the people you interact with are your source of inspiration. If you're short of friends and family, the best homework you can do is go out and socialise. Bear in mind, you are not approaching this from a critical perspective, as if on a quest to highlight other people's shortcomings; that will only create instability with your friends. You should approach this task from a viewpoint of curiosity. It is actually incredibly healthy to understand what makes your friends and family tick. Understanding their beliefs and perspectives can ultimately lead to stronger relationships; a bonus considering you will also end up with a hit sitcom! It is also important to bear in mind, for those of you morally opposed to psychoanalysing your friends, that your investigations should be seen as a springboard to designing a robust, breakthrough comedy creation; your insights very quickly lead you away from your original subject and towards the construction of a unique and independent character... I guess, what I am trying to say is that your nosiness will be untraceable!

Whilst this approach is fresh in your mind it may a good idea for you to have a go yourself before you read any further so you can start to feel inspired by the process. On one side of a blank sheet, you should make a list of about ten friends, acquaintances or family (use pseudonyms if you feel more comfortable) and down the other side try to look for a defining preoccupation or obsession that sums them up. Try to do this exercise quickly and not over think it. People are, by design, multidimensional, complex and layered but, at the start of this process, you are not yet interested in these deep examinations. At the moment, the closer you come to summing them up in one sentence, the easier you will find it to 'nail' who a character 'is.'

When you are finished you should end up with a table that looks like this...

<i>Character</i>	<i>Preoccupation or obsession</i>
<b>Character A</b>	Obsessed with being the groups' comedian.
<b>Character B</b>	Obsessed with looking after others.
<b>Character C</b>	Obsessed with sex.
<b>Character D</b>	Obsessed with organising their life.
<b>Character E</b>	Obsessed with how miserable they perceive their lives.
<b>Character F</b>	Obsessed with how others perceive them.
<b>Character G</b>	Obsessed with their working and progressing their career.
<b>Character H</b>	Obsessed with finding a cheap alternative.
<b>Character I</b>	Obsessed with a feeling that they are being left out.
<b>Character J</b>	Obsessed with impressing others.

These are just a few of mine. In fact, Character J, was very much based upon how I perceived myself and the resulting character was one which was picked up and developed professionally. This method really works.

Once you have created this list it starts to become easier to see how situation comedy can write itself. Imagine characters A through D stuck in a lift together. Based upon these traits we know that Character A would start cracking jokes about their situation whilst Character B would be obsessively, and possibly irritatingly, checking that everyone was OK. Character C would be trying to crack on to Character D who would be desperately trying to reorganise their Excel spreadsheet to take into account a possible two hour delay to their day. As the scene progresses Character D might start fighting with Character A, who is certainly trivialising the situation with inappropriate jokes. Character A, therefore, may turn his attention to Character C who may laugh heartily at his wisecracks, but only because she secretly thought she was in there.

Have a look at the list that you have generated. How would your characters react when stranded in a lift? Who would annoy them? Who would they find an ally with? What solutions would they come up with finding an escape? As mentioned earlier, the trick is that a good character will tell *you* how they are going to act without you having to invent reactions and actions for them. Now consider this... Which character/s are starting to spark your interest? Which ones have the mileage to be able to develop further into a sitcom or sketch series premise? Hopefully, this simple exercise has shown you how easy it is to start finding inspiration to create comedy characters. If

not, there are more exercises to try.



## *Looking for clues in language.*

Writing a novel is by no means an easy task but one advantage the author has over the scriptwriter is that they are able to explicitly justify their character's actions and words. They are afforded the luxury of a medium where you can deliver a line of character dialogue and then spend pages, if you so choose, explaining why they said it and how they were feeling when they did. In scripts, comedy or otherwise, you generally have limited ways of giving insight into a character's emotions when they say something (unless you employ voiceovers, which should always be used with caution). For the most part, the successful scriptwriter recognises that each word they choose for their characters to say, in turn, says something about their characters.

For example, imagine a character walks into a bar and approaches the barman to order a drink. The first thing they will do is greet the barman. What does that character say? *Hello? Hi there? All right mate? Morning? How you doing? Hi ya? Good Afternoon Sir?...* Each of these examples could be a way of starting a scene but each greeting says something different about the character delivering them. From this simple salutation the reader can tell if the character is formal, informal, friendly, hostile, chatty, solemn, posh or common. This is because language is one of our primary ways of communicating and the words, and combinations of words, we choose to express ourselves with define us as individuals.

It is therefore logical to conclude that in attempting to find pre-occupations and obsessions in the people we study, we should look at their language and choice of words in order to offer us insight into their motivations.

One of the most effective ways of doing this is to record people talking about their lives and write down word for word what they say. Again, the alarm bells in your head may start chiming at the thought of so blatantly using friends as subjects but, in my experience, most people love being the subject of these kinds of observation. In London, street artists get paid twenty pounds a time to draw caricatures of tourists who queue up to have their faces exaggerated in charcoal and their flaws highlighted to crowds of onlookers. Similarly, a lot of people are flattered by a writer who finds them so interesting that they want take a closer look.

Analysing language patterns is one of the most powerful exercises I have given to my comedy students and one that has proven to produce incredible results. If possible, take a tape recorder, Dictaphone, computer or camera and ask to record a friend chatting for a minute on a chosen subject. This could be their favourite holiday, their best meal ever or their thoughts on the global economic crisis, it really doesn't matter. You are looking for how they express themselves and the more comfort and freedom you give them to do this, the better the results will be. When they have finished, write up exactly what they said including every 'umm' and 'errr' that they included (these often reveal the thinking patterns behind their speeches). In doing this exercise be up front, or indeed, let your subject join you in analysing the results. It can often be insightful for both parties.

In order to demonstrate the next stage of this exercise I have provided an example verbatim transcribe of an interview I conducted with a subject Stacey (again, this is a pseudonym) who at the time was an A-level student of about eighteen, keen for a career as a veterinary surgeon. Read through the following and start to think about the language and expression she has used in order to communicate her points.

\*\*

### ***Transcript: Interview with Stacey***

#### ***Stacey, tell me about your usual Saturday...***

*Umm... my usual Saturday consists of waking up, probably going shopping with my friends... Err... Spending the day talking to my cats even... That's the usual... Umm... When it comes to the evening I usually end up stuck on MSN which is very time consuming and I shouldn't do it. You end up on there at seven and you come off at about twelve... you've been talking to people for three hours and you don't know what the hell you've been talking about. Umm... Then it's usually bedtime and I dream very strange dreams. One time I was... umm... sleep talking about a bloke with an egg on his head and I got really aggressive to my Mum which was rather funny in the morning. But I'm not sure what type of egg he had on his head or if his head was the shape of an egg... God knows.*

#### ***Have you got any pets?***

*Yeah, I have two cats; Oliver and Oscar. Both black... Err... Oliver's a bit camp. He makes a silly noise, it's like 'brrruuup' all the time and Oscar's quite proud... and manly... it's an odd combination.*

***What was the last TV show you watched and what do you think of it?***

*Umm... What did I watch?*

***Do you watch Eastenders?***

*I don't watch Eastenders!*

***Did you watch Hollyoaks?***

*I think I watched Hannah Montana.*

***OK. Think about Hannah Montana...***

*Umm... Ooh... It was an episode where she had to go out with some guy that was shorter than her and she didn't like that but then she had to overcome that because he was a nice guy in the end... And he was dressed as an elf at one point.*

***And why do you like watching it?***

*Umm, my sister likes watching it and I like the music as well.*

***But you just watch it cos your sister likes watching it?***

*Yeah... Well she's (turns her nose up) six.*

***\*\*End of conversation\*\****

As human beings we instantly start to form judgements about this character without ever even seeing her. It may be that in your head you have got her physical description right down to the colour of her hair or that you automatically like or dislike her. Personal opinions aside, as writers we are more interested in the motivations, pre-occupations and potential obsessions of this character. Take a few minutes to read through the transcript again then write some notes on the following questions. Try to hone in on specific quirks and words that help people form opinions of her.

- What is Stacey preoccupied by?

- What is noticeable about the type of words she uses?
- How does she express her opinions?
- What do the clues, from her speech patterns and language, give us about her as a character?

I have conducted this assignment on numerous occasions and every time my students have come up with an interesting take on the character of Stacey. Having discussed her idiosyncrasies, flaky thought patterns and bubbly expression in detail I noticed a very remarkable outcome; all of my students seemed completely equipped to write for her and, without exception, were easily able to formulate jokes and comedy scenarios for Stacey instantly and instinctively.

So what do we learn from studying Stacey? What aspects of her character can we perceive as obsession? What are the rules of writing for Stacey?

***Rule Number 1: Stacey is obsessed with cats and cuteness.***

So I know I led Stacey into this one by asking her about her pets but she does respond to this question in an interesting way. She humanises her pets by attributing characteristics of people to them ('camp', 'proud', 'manly'). She may not be obsessed with cuteness but she is certainly spends a lot of time getting to know her fluffy felines. The way she talks about her dream, her sister and her family... even her thinly disguised love of Hannah Montana suggests certain, dare I say, 'babyish' qualities to Stacey.

***Rule Number 2: Stacey often breaks off into fantasy.***

This is quite apparent through a lot of Stacey's conversation. From discussing the surreal dream she had involving an egg to getting lost in an episode of Hannah Montana, Stacey's conversations are often broken and non linear. Her creative brain is certainly working quicker than her speech!

***Rule Number 3: Stacey blames embarrassing things on her sister.***

This is a very nice feature of Stacey's language. It is obvious from her almost photographic recollection of an episode of Hannah Montana that

she is clearly a fan of the show but when pushed on the subject she realises that she may be revealing a potentially embarrassing interest to me and so she quickly back peddles to a position where she can blame it all on her sister. She clearly wants to celebrate this programme... but she is eighteen after all.

#### ***Rule Number 4: Stacey gets muddled***

Stacey has a certain habit of not following through on a line of thinking. She drifts off of subjects quickly and talks about events that are entirely unrelated. A description of her day soon becomes an account of her 'weird' dream suggesting that Stacey is not always focused on the task in hand.

Once we know the rules of Stacey it becomes a lot easier to use her in different scenes and set-ups. Imagine, for example, that Stacey was going to the library to pick up a book to help her study for her degree at University. We know that when she enters the library she could be instantly confused. We may get some mileage out of the librarian trying to point her in the direction of the veterinary science section and Stacey continuously ending up in the photocopy room. We know that Stacey would get sidetracked by 'cuteness' so she may open a book and be immediately fixated on the pretty drawings of Cocker Spaniels' faces rather than the depiction of the animal surgery that she is meant to focus upon...

She could also be sidetracked by her own vivid imagination, assuming the position of a dying dog to get into character. Ultimately, when some hot guy notices and shows disapproval she would blame the whole scenario on her sister...

Of course, we are not there with a whole comic scene yet. Narrative comedy relies on characters that are more multilayered than this but as a starting point it is imperative that you understand the default settings for your character; how they will act and react in any given situation. Once we have these it is easier to add on the other facets of the character that will impact their behaviour even more. More importantly, once we know the rules of writing a character it is simply a case of exaggerating them to create the comedy...

\*\*

## ***Stacey: Exaggerated Dialogue***

*My usual Saturday is normally very hectic. First of all I have to wake up. Then I have to get out of bed. Normally after that I'd have to have breakfast so it's normally really hardcore.*

*Then I have to spend almost three hours chatting to my friends on MSN. Then I go and meet them at the shops but I have to be quick so that I can get home and chat to them on MSN for another 3 hours.*

*I love being around my cats though. I've got eight of them; Freddie, Oscar, Humphrey, Rubert, Hannah and Montana... I love potatoes. Especially chips...*

*And then I normally watch about seven episodes of Hannah Montana... I know every single episode... Of course I don't like it but my sister does, bless her... So I have to get into it really.*

\*\*\*

You should now review the interview you have transcribed. Look at the patterns of language and expression. Look for what your subject chooses to focus upon when discussing a topic; these will give you great clues as to what their fixation is. What are the 'rules' of your character? Sticking to them will not only help you to write with greater consistency but will reduce the amount of time you spend suffering from writer's block.

If all else fails, don't give up; there are still plenty of methods for exploring your characters to come.

### ***Interrogate your character.***

An interrogation means to examine a person by questioning. Normally we would associate this being done under immense pressure by a policeman investigating a murder or by a cinematic Bond villain trying to extract information from his enemies. In fact, this principle can be used to extract information from your characters. When put under pressure, amidst a barrage of questions with little time to consider answers or pre-empt a response, humans give away interesting aspects of their personality that may have otherwise been hidden.

This is an exercise I would usually do in with my students in groups of two where one person is the interrogator and one is playing the role of the character under a spotlight (or the character we want to explore). It works equally well as a solo exercise as long as you keep the pressure on yourself to answer each question quickly and without consideration. The best case scenario is to work with a friend, someone who will not judge the answers you come out with or someone you are happy to let your guard down with.

All you need in order to complete this task is a timer set to one minute. The idea is that you come up with a list of around ten to fifteen questions that require immediate response and a varying amount of justification. In order for you not to spend your precious time thinking of questions rather than exploring your character I have prepared some samples below.

<i>Interrogation Card 1</i>	
<i>Where did you last go on holiday?</i>	<i>What do you like about them?</i>
<i>Did you like it?</i>	<i>Did you ever have a fight?</i>
<i>Why?</i>	<i>What was it about?</i>
<i>What would be your death row meal?</i>	<i>What's your job?</i>
<i>Why?</i>	<i>What do you hate about it?</i>
<i>Who's your best friend?</i>	<i>What do you love about it?</i>
<i>Interrogation Card 2</i>	
<i>What did you last see at the cinema?</i>	<i>What age were you happiest?</i>
<i>What did you like about it?</i>	<i>Why?</i>
<i>What annoys you about going to the cinema?</i>	<i>Do you get on with your parents?</i>
<i>What's the worst piece of bad news you heard this week?</i>	<i>Why do you say that?</i>
<i>Why?</i>	<i>Who do you admire?</i>
	<i>Why?</i>
	<i>What is your motto in life?</i>

The idea of this assignment is that your 'interrogator' has to get through every question in under a minute. They should fire the questions at you with little time for you to think and plan. Your role is to stay in character for the duration and answer as true to your persona. As a starting point you might 'borrow' the persona of a friend or colleague to answer in the style of or use a character that you have already started to develop. Either way, the responses you give will start to give you insight into the psyche of your chosen subject and, as I have discovered, you will start forming jokes and gags around them.

This is quite a nerve wracking exercise so it may be that you want to

try it out first by responding as yourself before you adopt a new role to explore. Below is an example of a character I was developing. Tom was a jaded artist who hadn't sold a painting in years. He was around thirty but all ready beaten by life and the problems it presented him. I used this method because I was stuck for where to take this character. Having explored him from the obvious angles I felt it time to get his take on other aspects of his life.

\*\*

## **Case Study: Tom Newton**

### ***Interrogation Card 2***

- **Where did you last go on holiday?**

*Holiday! What's that? I guess visiting my Mum in a nursing home is about as far as I got...*

- **Did you like it?**

*God No...*

- **Why?**

*There were no seats left and I had to sit next to this senile old bat who pissed herself every time she coughed...*

- **What would be your death row meal?**

*Anything other than pasta...*

- **Why?**

*Cos that's all I eat? It'd be just my luck to finish off my life with another bowl of it....*

- **Who's your best friend?**

*James – a mate from school...*

- **What do you like about him?**

*Cos he's rich and buys me beer...*



- **Did you ever have a fight?**

*Every conversation with him is a fight?*

- **What was it about?**

*It was probably about some girl who was out of my league and totally in his.*

- **What's your job?**

*An artist*

- **What do you hate about it?**

*Trying to sell my work.*

- **What do you love about it?**

*How many times have I asked myself that!*

\*\*\*

Having completed this exercise I have started to shape my views about who Tom is. Previous to this he was a negative and jobless artist; quite one dimensional and with the potential to become repetitive with his one-note sarcasm. Having completed this exercise I started to see new, fresh possibilities. I started to consider his relationships; that he is single with only his senile mother for company and that he was unconfident with girls due to existing in the shadow of a charmingly capable best friend. I looked at his daily food intake, mostly meagre portions of unexciting pasta, which started me thinking what his lifestyle would be like; scrimping, saving, cutting out coupons. Finally I discovered a cutthroat aspect of his personality; how he uses people to score free drinks at the pub. In conclusion, I have many different avenues to explore with Tom and, as a result, feel as if I know him a little better.

## ***Using monologues.***

As mentioned, I was twenty one when I got my first sitcom accepted for development by a television production company. In the world of television writing this is quite rare as generally successful writing careers do not flourish until the writer is thirty and has gained more life experience from

which to write about. Looking back, this was both a blessing and a curse. In many ways I don't think I was emotionally ready to handle all of the praise, rejection, script notes, meetings and constant scrutiny that came with the territory of writing comedy. In many ways I had no idea of what I was doing. I wasn't considered a particularly 'funny' person by my friends and family but, somehow, I was producing comedy that seemed to be striking gold upon every submission. Had I have been older and wiser I would have been able to suss out what I was doing right but, maybe, therein lied the strength of my writing at the time; written with honesty, wide eyed enthusiasm and rawness.

The first major lesson I learnt when writing my sitcom '*Theo*' was how much examination and inquiry went into writing a professional sitcom episode. I was immediately bombarded with the rules of writing a narrative comedy. Each page must contain four jokes, no more, no less. Storyline 'A' must present itself within the first two pages and Storyline 'B' must come not long after. Characters had to move the story or move on, each line of dialogue should be inspected for individual words that could be cut... time is money. Broadcasters have their own values which influence your comedy writing; I may be writing an excellent piece targeting people in their mid-twenties but the broadcaster was trying to reach a teen demographic.

So lost was I in a sea of rules and requirements that I felt I was stepping on eggshells even writing a joke. Was it what they wanted? Was it funny? Am I telling the joke in ten words when I could easily say it in nine? I immediately became so unnerved by the rules and regulations of it all that comedy, to coin the phrase, quickly became a very serious business. For this reason, my best friend at the time was the monologue.

When writing a monologue I could focus on one the needs and wants of one character. I didn't have to worry about pace, structure or joke count but could just concentrate of getting their vision of the world into my head. It helped me to learn about who they were so that I could understand their 'angle' when trying to shoehorn them into my story. Writing monologues remains one of my favourite ways of developing characters. For a start I was not answerable to anyone. In many ways I was writing for the bin knowing that these rough sketches would never be seen by anyone but myself. I could forget the complications of scenes and storylines and allow my character to breath. To be artistic, they would talk to me on an intimate level.

My character, Theo, was a backpacker. He was ignorantly unaware of any culture but his own and entirely incapable of doing anything independently. So when my script editors started requiring story arcs I started by writing a Theo monologue in the hopes that *he* would give me the answers. I metaphorically placed Theo into a cafe in India and just asked him to talk about his day...

\*\*

### ***Sample Monologue: THEO***

*So here I am in Bombay... Sorry... Mumbai... I always call it Bombay but it ain't been called that in ages. I think the Indian people renamed it to celebrate the English people first discovering them. I love it here... It's totally great and also totally nice. This is, like, the first week of my holiday... no actually, it's not a holiday. It's like, I guess, a pilgrimage, to discover lots of totally cool stuff about different people's cultures and lots of other cool stuff about myself. I'm going to go to India, Nepal, Singapore, Australia and then finally America cos I really want to learn about their culture. I've guess I've always wanted to be an adventurer. All my mates at school totally laugh at me and say things like 'yeah... you're so great, you're such a survivalist' and I just say 'Yeah totally.' I think I've always known it. Like some people know they want to be a plumber or a dustbin man or something, and that's like me, I just wanted to be a traveller. It's like an innate urge.*

*Naturally, for a trip like this you don't just book a flight and then just do it. I've had to prepare myself both physically and mentally. Like, I'm planning to do a trek to some old base camp around Mount Everest. For those of you who don't know, Everest is like this well big mountain thing in Nepal. Obviously it's going to be fairly tough climbing it especially if I want to get to the top like Columbus did, or something. So I've done loads of walking at home. My Mum even bought me an Alsatian dog which I take for a walk everyday which is a serious amount of practice if you're planning on navigating one of the tallest mountain regions in the world.*

*I've met loads of really great people on this trip to. Other backpackers who are really great and really nice. Well, actually, I haven't met anyone yet but that's what will definitely happen.*

*I haven't got on well with the food, though. They have loads of curry out here. Not proper curry like what I get down the Crawley Curry House. I think they must have different cooking facilities here cos they make it too spicy. Unfortunately, I couldn't eat it all which is sort of a shame. But luckily they have a Wimpy out here. It's really authentic cos they serve lamb burgers instead of beef burgers which is a total cultural difference. I think it's important to try lots of different foods. I like to taste burgers from all different cultures.*

*So, as you can see, I'm a really brilliant backpacker. I'm also really and totally respectful of other people's cultures. I think respecting other people's cultures is so important when you're visiting other countries. Like, for example, I met this guy the other day that totally refused to take off his shoes when visit some old sacred temple... that's not on... I think when in another country you should respect all their stupid little customs.*

**\*\***

What was enjoyable about doing this exercise for me was how quickly I got to know Theo, how distinctive his voice was and how easily I created jokes for him. It also allowed me to handle storylining for him as well as how he would interact with other people he met. It also started to lead me towards building up other aspects of his personality; his insane optimism and his obsession (though subconscious) with the supremacy of western culture – Theo became a personification of cultural imperialism from this moment on.

When teaching comedy writing, a monologue is one of the first exercises I get my class to do. It is often the most popular task as my students comment on how liberating it felt and how much they enjoyed the experience.

Having inspired yourself to create a character, this is the ultimate way of testing them out. If you do and you find yourself laughing then you have passed the training session. Next we will look at adding dimensions to these characters and building up the conflict within them.

## PART 2 : Adding dimensions to your characters

### *Can one dimensional characters be funny?*

The answer to this question is a categorical ‘Yes.’ ‘One dimensional characterisation’ is a derogatory comment usually found in the harshest of film reviews and universally accepted as an outcome most writers would wish to avoid. A ‘One dimensional’ character is one who has a single motivation that is both obvious and easy to grasp. There are no hidden depths to the character and no learned reason as to why they behave as they do, there is nothing new to discover about them and no emotional journey for them to take you on. So far, this is what we have been concentrating on when creating characters and the exercises discussed have required you to see behaviour in very black and white terms; a simple pre-occupation which causes the character to act as they do.

Though widely discouraged, there is a definite role that one dimensional characters can play. Here are just a few reasons as to why one dimensional characters can be an important part of your writing repertoire:

- In sketch comedy, the joke is normally the result of a single quirk of a character. Harry Enfield, a British comedian, made a fortune out of perceived one dimensional characters and even named his characters after their sole defining feature (Wayne and Waynetta Slob, Tim nice-but-dim and Mr You-don’t-wanna-do-that). In sketch comedy, multi dimensional characters can weigh the characters down. They only exist on screen for a matter of minutes and, often, there is not room for, or need to, explore their inner conflicts and multi facets; they are there to sell a joke and move on.
- Often one dimensional characters act as an easy lead into a bigger story. In America, where sitcoms are big business and competition between

different shows is rife, it is important to ‘grab your audience’ in the opening seconds of a new sitcom. For this reason, writers will often present their characters, in pilot episodes, as one dimensional. In ‘*Friends*,’ for example, the original set-up required Rachel to initially be seen as a one dimensional spoilt rich girl. It allowed us to understand the character quickly so that the subsequent story of her failed marriage and connection with the rest of the ensemble could be quickly established. It is only later on in the episode and series that the writers begin to add the layers to the character which gave her longevity and inner conflict; the chip on her shoulder about asserting her independence, her fragility about being single and her concern over breaking free from her need to please her parents. Yet all of these dimensions, though considered in her construction, remain aces up the writer’s sleeve to be showcased when the audience are ‘onboard’ with the character and sitcom.

- One dimensional characters can often be handy plot devices to help move the story along. In an early episode of American sitcom, ‘*Roseanne*’, the Conner family are thrown into panic when a door-to-door salesman drops dead in their kitchen. The predicament of sheltering their young children from the corpse in the kitchen and the insanity of the hours spent waiting for the coroner with a cadaver propped up at their dining room table brings out the various dimensions and depths of the principal cast, yet the salesman himself is a one dimensional role. His purpose is to enter the Conner residence and die!

One dimensional characters, therefore are not your enemy. Often they can be a way of telling a story, presenting a new character or writing quick gag

laden sketches. When designing a long running sitcom or narrative comedy drama, however, we need to consider giving the character multiple pre-occupations and obsessions so that the audience are constantly surprised by them. In essence we are looking at a simple formula:

**‘Overriding character trait + multiple dimensions  
= a character with longevity.’**

America’s (and indeed the World’s) longest running sitcom is ‘*The Simpsons*’. Arguably the lead in this ‘hundred-strong’ ensemble cast is Homer Simpson, the simple yet loveable patriarch of the Simpson family. Flying the flag of his character is the pre-occupation of ‘pleasure and eating.’ So strong is this pre-occupation that in any given situation, Homer will fixate on finding food or having fun. Yet in order for this character to exist on for the decades that ‘*The Simpsons*’ have coloured our TV screens, the character has to have more to offer. For this reason, Homer Simpson is, in fact, a complex character. For a start he is a family man. Often episodes surround his need to connect to a rebellious son and a ‘grade A’ daughter revealing his vulnerabilities as a father. He is also immensely proud, preferring to walk away from the wife he loves when not able to provide for her financially. He can be painfully self critical and often deals with his own fears of failure as a husband and worker. This has often been explored through a delicate and turbulent relationship with his own father who raised Homer to believe he was worthless; a lot of mileage is gained through the exploration of this relationship and the tender, but fleeting, moments where he is able to connect with his father. Homer is also a character with rage issues and ‘an act first think later’ personality. The build up of this character trait became the key narrative of ‘*The Simpsons Movie*’ where Homer ignites the hostility of the whole of Springfield when he irresponsibly pollutes the town’s water supply.

Although the beauty of writing a long term show is in developing these different facets, it is important to recognise the complexity of characters before we put pen to paper. Although their pre-occupations offer us a plethora of comedy material, we want our audience to engage with them for a long time. In this instance, one dimension just isn’t enough.

**Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?**

As any parent will testify to, the word 'Why' is one of the most overused questions in the repertoire of children under ten; 'It's bedtime now.' 'Why?'... 'Can you put on your seatbelt?' 'Why?' 'You need to brush your teeth before sleeping.' 'Why?'... 'Can you just do it and not keep asking why?' 'Why?' For anyone has attempted to pursue this line of questioning with a precocious youngster, the conversation usually goes along the lines of...

- 'You need to eat up your vegetables...'
- 'Why?'
- 'Because it will make you big and strong...'
- 'Why?'
- 'Because they have loads of vitamins in them...'
- 'Why?'
- 'Because they have...'
- 'Why?'
- 'Because... I don't know... God made them like that?'
- 'Why?'

...and so on. In my experience of being young and bombarding my parents with these nonsensical interrogations we always reached a stalemate when everything was attributed to the hand of God. It's hard to take your questioning any further without delving into the discipline of theology. What is important to note here is that all questioning of this nature seemed to take the questioner to the same place... God and his ultimate decisions was the 'catch all'.

But what has this got to do with writing comedy characters? As previously investigated, characters have primary pre-occupations and obsessions; David Brent is obsessed with entertaining people, Joey Tribbiani with food and women, Patsy Stone with drugs and alcohol. But 'Why?' are they obsessed with these trivialities? Let us take a David Brent as an example.



In the sitcom ‘The Office,’ David Brent is the Manager of a small firm of paper merchants. He is obsessed with being seen as an entertainer, a trait usually undermined by his own lack of comedy timing and ignorance towards the emotional needs of other characters. So *why* is David Brent like this? Generally it is because he loves his job and his colleagues. ‘*Why?*’ Because he sees them as his family? ‘*Why?*’ Because is he lonely. ‘*Why?*’ Because he hasn’t got any friends. ‘*Why?*’ Because he tries too hard. ‘*Why?*’ Because he is desperate for people to like him.

Now let’s take a more classic example of Basil Fawlty. Basil runs a hotel in Torquay and is obsessed with climbing the social ladder and being recognised as part of the elite. ‘*Why?*’ Because being respected is important to him. ‘*Why?*’ Because he needs to feel respected to feel a sense of achievement. ‘*Why?*’ Because people’s opinions are important. ‘*Why?*’ Because he needs them to gauge if he is liked or not. ‘*Why?*’ Because he is desperate for people to like him.

Hopefully you will see a common theme in both of these examples. When we push this line of questioning we, more often than not, end up reaching the same conclusion. Deep down the one trait that links both these characters, indeed most characters, indeed most human beings, is a psychological need to be liked. The ways that we express this need can be complex and annoying but, ultimately, this one universal truth unites us all.

This knowledge is fundamental when designing characters because it gives an audience a reason to want to follow a character on their journey. As human beings we understand the importance of connecting with others and how this basic human desire underpins the behaviours we exhibit and the decisions that we make. If our comedy characters also exhibit these desires, even at a subconscious level, we tend to forgive their most extreme pre-occupations and obsessions because we can see the ‘good’ in their motivations. To put it bluntly, we will like them.

Moreover, the need to be liked can constantly be at odds with the pre-occupation they exhibit in trying to achieve it. Although David Brent ultimately wants to be liked by his colleagues, his attempts to achieve this, through practical jokes and bad humour, actually drives them further away. This in turn causes him to go to greater lengths to win their approval making

his methods more extreme, madcap and, most importantly, funny. Let's look at how this manifests itself in other comedy creations...

- Edina Monsoon is desperate to be liked but only thinks of herself.
- Lisa Simpson is desperate to be liked but thinks she is more intelligent than those around her.
- Del Boy Trotter is desperate to be liked but is obsessed with making money.

Now imagine these characters in a real life situation; maybe they have all gone to a high class restaurant for an evening meal. Edina might order first without giving anyone time to look at the menu whilst Lisa may annoy people by eloquently interpreting the French menu and Del Boy ignores them whilst trying to scam a free meal. Whatever the scenario we can see the pain these characters are experiencing; all desperate to be liked but all failing miserably due to their own inadequacies. Putting our characters in pain is what drives comedy and, more often than not, the addition of this one character trait is a fast track method of helping an audience to engage with them long term.

## ***Adding more dimensions***

A few years ago my writing agent gave me what is, I believe, the most valuable piece of advice I have ever been given. It was during a particularly unfruitful time in my writing career when no matter how many scripts I wrote and sent out, nothing seemed to be met with anything more than another door slammed in my face. Having trained to do little else in life other than write and desperate for money, I took a job working in a toilet factory located at the end of the flight path of a major British airport (all true!). My job was to transfer pages of numbers that spewed like a fountain from the fax machine onto a tiny seven inch monitor in the corner of a dirty old office where people still smoked at their desks and unashamedly read porn magazines whilst taking phone orders for close coupled toilets. We were sat in exam conditions and told not to talk to each other for fear of not maintaining our work ethic.

Suffice it to say, I was pretty miserable.

I started to think if it was all worth it and worried that the writing path would see me waste years of my life working in awful jobs like this. At the height of my misery I spoke to my agent. She felt for me but told me one important truth – *‘no matter what day job you do you will always be a writer.’*

Those few words solved the problem of my depressive and self pitying attitude. She told me that it is actually a privilege to work in such a situation because, as a writer, I should thrive on discovering the bizarre and interesting characters that made up this factory. They think differently to me, have diverse lifestyles and represent a pocket of society that few other writers are privileged to see. True, she could have been putting a good spin on a bad situation, but these words stuck with me. Unfortunately writing is rarely paid through any other means than a commission fought for with blood and tears; but *that* is the career so enjoy the ride... you are a writer just by sitting down and writing.

It has always interested me, therefore, as to why I like it. I am fortunate enough to be surrounded by a lot of friends who are also writers and have discussed this very point on numerous occasions; does anyone actually like the process of writing? Strangely the answer is more commonly ‘No’. As the old adage says, writing is like giving birth. It is long, painful, thankless and frustrating but at the end of it you have your script. As the printer heats up delivering you reams and reams of paper you forget all of the anguish and torture it took you to create it; you have a solid piece of work in front of you that *you* created and that could be the one story that people will talk about for decades.

It is this pleasure / pain conundrum that I wish to explore when discussing multi-dimensional characters. Even as I sit writing these words I am in some degree of pain. My flat around me is full of one hundred and one different chores that I could be doing. My living room is a mess, the ironing pile is touching the ceiling and if I leave the washing up any longer I’ll need a blow torch to get it clean. Moreover, the couch looks very comfy and daytime television is very easy to watch requiring little or no brain power from myself. I don’t want to be stuck writing... Do I? In fact, there are two parts of

my personality that are in conflict here; the side that has a job to do and craves the satisfaction that comes from completing this chapter in my book and the side that is lazy and wants to slob around watching reruns of old quiz shows. If this were a scene in a sitcom, the variables would be greatly exaggerated; my study would be an uninviting box room which was cold and grey and my couch would be a leather recliner with massage function. The point is, in this one scene, only one part of my personality is going to win. I either give in and lounge on the couch all day or I finish the chapter; either way I will always lose (or always win, depending on how you look at it). The conflict between the different parts of my personality is what creates drama, tension and, importantly, comedy.

## ***Scenes are boxing matches***

Think of every scene you are going to write as a boxing match. A boxing match is a situation where two people enter the ring but only one can come out victorious. This analogy is your ‘nuts and bolts’ of comedy writing (and indeed any narrative writing). In scriptwriting you have three different scenarios, or metaphorical boxing matches, that can occur:

- Character vs. Situation
- Character vs. Character
- Character vs. Themselves

All of the above aspects of writing will be explored in more detail in subsequent eBooks but, for now, we are concentrating on Character vs. Themselves.

In order for a comedy character to be engaging, fruitful and have a long shelf life they have to be in constant turmoil. In every scene they have to enter their own boxing match where two aspects of their multi-dimensional personality are at war with each other and only one of these ‘wants’ will win. In the blue corner a character may want to save money, for example, whereas in the red corner they may wish to impress the classy socialite who has just walk into the bar. It may be that, in the blue corner, a character may be obsessed with impressing their boss whereas, in the red corner, they are a serious control freak who only wants to do things their way. Whichever conflicts you come up with it is important that when constructing a comedy

character that we build in as many of these conflicts into their default setting as possible.

### ***Case Study: Father Ted***

The situation comedy, *Father Ted*, was a British show running from 1995-1998 that revolved around the parish of Father Ted Crilly. Ted was a priest who dreamed of an easy and comfortable life but was continuously hindered the quirky and frustrating supporting cast. They consisted of simpleton Father Dougal McGuire, foul-mouthed alcoholic Father Jack Hackett and pushy tea obsessed housekeeper Mrs Doyle.

For the series finale Ted's effort to rescue a suicidal priest were, by chance, seen by a powerful American priest, Buzz Cagney, who offers him a job working in America. For Ted, who dreams of sunshine and trips to Vegas, this is a dream come true... in the Blue Corner is his obsession with living the easy life. The conundrum comes, however, when he realises that there is only one position available and by going to America he will be forced to leave behind his pseudo-family. Dysfunctional as they are, deep down he loves them. In the Red Corner is his role as a father figure to Dougal, Jack and Mrs Doyle.

The episode plays around with this conflict by upping the stakes of his decision. Devoid of the guts to tell his parishioners that they are not invited, Ted's anguish is heightened when Mrs Doyle burns all of their furniture that they 'won't be needing in America' whilst Dougal and Jack indulge in purchasing a multitude of 'American' artefacts ready for their trip. As Ted tries more and more elaborate ways to 'let them down gently' his efforts are constantly thwarted and the episode climaxes with him abandoning them at the airport.

As Ted sits on the plane awaiting take off the 'Character vs. Themselves' situation is crystal clear; either he stays in his seat and allows his obsession with living the easy life to win or he makes a swift departure back to the departure lounge and his gang of eccentric friends. Either way, there is a clear 'winner' and 'loser' here as there can only be one outcome.

Rejecting the American Dream, with a little help from Buzz who admits that Ted will be working with gun wielding teenagers in inner city American

schools, Ted decides that home is where the heart is. He returns to Ireland resolved to a life of calamity with his former housemates.

Having already bequeathed our character with a comedy producing obsession and softened them with a ‘need to be loved’ that justifies their idiosyncrasy, it is now important that we build in other traits that are going to create the type of conflict and tension that naturally causes comedy.

## ***Further Conflicts***

In order to take you through the process, I am going to use my situation comedy, ‘Theo’ as a case in point. As previously mentioned, my character Theo’s overriding obsession was with impressing those around him. He did this because he was insecure and desperate to connect with people. A further dimension, however, was that he was ignorant (and it is certainly difficult to impress people as much as Theo wanted to when you are fighting against your own stupidity!). This combination of traits seemed like a goldmine for potential comedy one-liners...

### **Theo’s ignorance vs. His need to impress**

*Example from original screenplay*

**THEO:**

I’ve been so ill, Anne. I had chicken pox for over three years!

**ANNE:**

That wasn’t chicken pox, that was acne.

As well as the above, I made Theo incredibly competitive. This added another layer of tension for the character as winning (even winning an argument) is very difficult to achieve when you’re battling against your own ignorance.

### **Theo’s ignorance vs. Competitiveness**

*Example from original screenplay*

**THEO:**

Actually, I was the best scout in that club, everyone thought so. I singlehandedly mobilised scouts to take part in the 'Help a Granny' day... And the Granny we helped was overwhelmed...She couldn't fit us all in her living room.

Theo was also incredibly and painfully shy around women, in fact, they scared the Hell out of him! This contrasted perfectly with his need to impress people, which compelled him to try and woo the opposite sex...

### **Theo's fear of women vs. His need to impress**

Example from original screenplay

**JENNIFER:**

Hi. Theo. How are you?

**THEO:**

Yeah fine thanks... You're looking great today... Not that you don't normally... Well, I wouldn't have tried to snog you if you didn't... Well, no, I mean, I would... I'd snog you even if you dressed like a dog... Not that you would dress like a dog... Not that you could... You know, I don't even look at your clothes... Not that I'm looking at anything else, mind you. Well, I am. Well I'm not. Sorry... Am I going on too much?

**JENNIFER:**

Not at all. It's good to know your tongue's good for something.

I kept working with Theo, building up layer upon layer of character traits to make him multi-dimensional and to give him the longevity to survive several series. Each character trait was the ultimate headache for another causing the character to be in constant conflict and turmoil. The combination of conflicting obsession is what caused both the pain for the character and, hopefully, the high joke count. If I was to sum up Theo in a list of ten traits I don't think I could do it. Hours and hours of work went into him. He was as

complex in my mind as any human I may meet on the street. For the sake of conciseness I have attempted to list his key character traits below.

- Obsession with impressing people
- Need to please
- Fear of women
- Ignorance
- Competitiveness
- Desire to connect with people
- Insane jealousy of everyone
- Sulkiness
- Creativity and imagination
- Obsessed with 'New Age' thinking
- Lazy
- Avoidance of anything physically hard
- Obsessed with media culture

A list like this is what you are aiming for now. Think of the obsessions and pre-occupations you have already assigned to your character. Now think to yourself, what is the worst conflicting trait that this character could also exhibit. If your character is a young girl obsessed with 'cuteness' (a.k.a Stacey) then maybe she could think herself to be ugly or have ridiculously high standards. If she has those high standards then you could also make her have low self esteem too so that her expectations of situations and her perception of her own performance are always at odds with each other.

For now, have a go at brainstorming this. It doesn't matter if every example is imperfect, the aim here is to generate a long list of traits from which to pick your best. The more carefree your mind is when partaking in the exercise, the more freedom you allow yourself to think outside the box and hit on that secret gem.



## *Final design of your character*

Take a look at the list that you have created as it is time to create a blueprint for your character. Which dynamics interest you? Which have started you thinking of comedy situations? Which ones are already making you think of jokes, punch lines, set-ups and payoffs? If you are still a little unsure then the following exercise should help you to wade through the raw thoughts and start to see what traits work and which do not.

The object of this exercise is to pair off the different pre-occupations and obsessions and see which situations would naturally exploit the conflicts within your comedy character. Draw a table, like the one below. Down the left column, write down different combinations of pre-occupations and in the right hand column, try to imagine a situation (much like Father Ted's 'runway' decision) that would lead to a boxing match between obsession A and obsession B.

<i>Obsession</i>	<i>Example Scenario</i>
Fear of women vs. laziness	The character phones in sick to his scary female boss. He wants to stay at home but must persuade her that his illness is genuine.
Obsession with New Age vs. Jealousy	The character sets up a stall at a local psychic fare but the women next to him has far more impressive paraphernalia.
Laziness vs. Obsession with Media	The character is offered tickets to a music concert but wants to stay home on the couch.
Desire to Sulk vs. Fear of Women	The character is looking for sympathy from his girlfriend after he lost his job.
Ignorance vs. Avoidance of physical activity.	The character accidentally enters a decathlon after mistakenly thinking it was another name for a drinking contest.

What I have found when I do this task is that not only have I learnt more and more about my character but I have already produced the synopsis for ten potential episodes. In doing this, we realise how multi-dimensional a character can be... How they can run for four or five series based upon a little amount of work in experimenting with their personalities.

## ***Putting it all together and moving forward***

Congratulations, you have now created your first comedy character. Hopefully, if you have stuck to the exercises in this book, you have found this process enjoyable and rewarding and it has helped you to transform an idea for a comedy character into a fully fledged multi-dimensional personality that will give you and your audience hours of laughter, empathy and gratification. With all of these ideas still swirling around your head, it may be a good idea to write down your character profile on one sheet of A4 so that you can cement their persona in your mind. I find it helpful to scour the internet looking for pictures of people that bear a resemblance to how I envisage my character in my mind. I make a mood board with drawing, photos, pictures and words that I frame and put up on my wall as a focus and source of inspiration for when I write. The clearer your character is to you, both physically and emotionally, the greater clarity you will have in writing for them and they will become all the more vivid to those reading the script, those commissioning and those performing!

Of course, characters don't exist in isolation. They need an arena in which to exist and a cast of friends, family and colleagues around them who will create conflict, tension and humour. It is in creating these dynamics that the situation comedy narrative comes alive and you can move onto creating the complex and comical storylines that your characters will encounter.

In this eBook I have attempted to give you a range of exercises, instructions and tips on how to create a great comedy character. Having performed an immense amount of script reading work, I have found that a common theme amongst new, and sometimes established writers, is that they do not put in the effort to construct characters at the start of their journey and, believe me, it is noticeable in their scripts. Without this time spent, storylines can seem flat and haphazard where characters seem to exist to move the story from point A to point B without having their own voice or debilitating obsession that hinders their progress and adds depth and dynamic to the story. With production companies and agents receiving hundreds of sample sitcom scripts a week you cannot afford to be another writer that overlooks this important aspect of screenwriting. Remember, that having read this book you will already have an advantage over the speculative writers who are your competition in getting that elusive writing commission.

Having your characters devised in this much detail sets you on the journey towards constructing a better script... So now what? Important to the process of sitcom writing is the knowledge and skill in creating comical storylines. In my experience this process is a fifty-fifty split between your own creativity and the rules and regulations that govern constructing a satisfying narrative. Storyline structures should be set early on so that your audience can easily follow the journey of your characters and to link individual episodes so as to be easily grasped by your audience.

If you are interested in this aspect of sitcom writing then look out for my next eBook, '***How to write Comedy Storylines.***' This eBook will explore the professional structures and processes of writing comical narrative to give you expertise in negotiating these exciting but complicated methods. In the mean time, good luck experimenting with your comical creations.

# **How To Write Comedy Characters**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## FOREWORD

If you've ever made someone laugh then you can write comedy

## PART 1: Where to start...

What is the difference between a comedy character and a character in drama?

Pre-occupations and Obsessions

Pre-occupations and Obsessions come from your own experience.

Investigating Pre-occupations and Obsessions.

Interrogate your character.

Using monologues.

## PART 2 : Adding dimensions to your characters

Can one dimensional characters be funny?

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

Adding more dimensions

Scenes are boxing matches

Further Conflicts

Final design of your character

Putting it all together and moving forward