

# IMPROVISATION

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## STAND-UP COMEDY

Yeah, yeah, you're pretty funny. But it's one thing to make some of your friends laugh at a party. It's a whole other ballgame to get on a stage in front of an audience and do stand-up comedy. To do **any** kind of live performance, you need to have a strong ego and nerves of steel. To do stand-up comedy, you need to be virtually insane. Almost everybody bombs their first time ("bombing" means that you didn't make 'em laugh . . . in the world of stand-up, that's not good).

There's a common misconception that stand-up comics do nothing all day and tell little stories to drunken audiences at night. It's A LOT tougher than that. Stand-up comics spend hours every day working on and perfecting their routines, and they have to be able to read their audience to know exactly what kind of humor they'll respond to. Before you go stand in front of the infamous brick wall, you will need some guidance. To begin, you need to know general vocabulary associated with stand-up comedy.

### COMIC VOCABULARY:

<b>To kill</b>	To do really well. The audience loves you.
<b>To bomb</b>	To do really badly. This is where there is a danger of tomato peltage.
<b>Dying</b>	The process of bombing.
<b>Set</b>	Your collection of jokes. A noun. (E.g., "I just memorized my set.")
<b>Setup</b>	The explanation part of a joke. It's the part of the joke that you're not supposed to laugh at. The exposition of a situation or story.
<b>Punch line</b>	The funny part of a joke. What you're supposed to laugh at.
<b>Heckler</b>	Someone in the audience who talks and interrupts a comedian in an insulting way, in attempt to make the comedian bomb.
<b>Blue</b>	When a comic is "blue," it means that he/she is using dirty language and/or talking about sexual (or otherwise adult) situations in an explicit way.

### HOW TO WRITE FOR STAND UP COMEDY

- STEP 1 – Study the pros
- STEP 2 – Gather material
- STEP 3 – Write the routine
- STEP 4 – Rehearse the routine



## **STEP 1: STUDY THE PROS**

Study professional comic at work... on stage, TV, or videotape. Study their techniques and get a feel for how they construct their jokes. Most importantly, study what type of comic they are (see below)

**IS THIS COPING?** Only if you perform their joke and stand up! THEN YES. The point here is to get a feel of what works for you! The biggest sin in comedy is to steal another comic's jokes. Never perform any variations or any comedians joke or stand-up because that would still be considered stealing.

### **COMIC TYPES**

#### **1. OBSERVATIONAL COMIC**

*Jerry Seinfeld , Ellen Degeneres, Brian Regan, James Gaffigan, Michael Jr., Jeff Allen*

The observational comic picks up on all the quirks and minute details of everyday life.

This is probably the most common and popular form of stand-up comedy, and for good reason. It is the easiest for the audience to connect with — but that doesn't mean it's easy to perform. This style is much more than just making things that everyone notices funny. It's all about making the audiences see these commonplace things from a fresh perspective — yours.

Observational comedians communicate the inconsistencies of everyday life to the audience. When they ask, “Did you ever notice ...?”, the audience answers “Yes!” with their laughter. It's as if the comic is inside the audience members' heads, commenting on some of the basic truths of life — and hey, the truth is funny.

With observational comedy it's hard to feel that you're bringing something new to the table, because so much ground has already been covered. You know the topics — dating, airline travel, dogs and cats, the differences between men and women — but don't despair. You can breathe life into even the most common topics with your unique perspective. You'll see something no one has ever seen before, a fresh take on an old subject. There's a reason this type of comedy is so successful — it works.

#### **2. TOPICAL COMIC**

*Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, Letterman , Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher, Tosh, Tim Hawkins, Anjelah Johnson*

Topical comedy relies on headlining/important news and current affairs. It dates quickly, but is a popular form of comedy for late night talk shows.

#### **3. CHARACTER COMIC**

*Tim Allen (mocho man), Andy Kaufman (immigrant), Larry the Cable Guy (white collar worker), Sarah Silverman (feminist), Margaret Cho (Aisan), Gabriel Iglesias (Mexican/overweight)*

Character comedy derives humor from a persona invented by a performer. Much character comedy comes from stereotypes

#### 4. PROP COMIC

*Carrot Top, Gallagher*

Comedy that relies on ridiculous props, casual jackets or everyday objects used in humorous ways.

#### 5. PHYSICAL COMIC

*Jim Carrey, Robin Williams, Chevy Chase, Dane Cook*

Somewhat similar to slapstick, this form of comedy uses physical movement and gestures.

#### 6. IMPERSONATION COMIC

*Dana Carvey (George W. Bush, Johnny Carson, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Bill Cosby, Jay Leno, Richard Nixon, Ross Perot, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Donald Trump) Frank Caliendo (Jerry Seinfeld, Robert De Niro, Casey Casum, John Maden)*

When the comic imitates the appearance, voice or manner of a well-known celebrity.

#### 7. IMPROVISATIONAL COMIC

*Robin Williams, Wayne Brady, Ryan Stiles, Colin Mochrie, Drew Carey*

Improvisational comics rarely plan out their routines.

### **DETERMINE THE EMOTIONAL ATTITUDE OF THE COMIC AND YOURSELF**

- Richard Lewis is a man in perpetual pain. ....Denis Leary is as hostile as you can get.
- Answer these questions....
  - What is your emotional attitude?
  - Are you zany, cynical, deadpan, naïve, or a bizarre combination of all these traits?
- Don't pick the emotional attitude that you think is funniest; pick the one that **matches you**.
- You're funniest when you're honest.



## **STEP 2: GATHER MATERIAL**

Before you get on stage, you have to figure out what you are going to say. The audience may find it amusing to watch you melt into a puddle of sweat while you desperately try to think of a joke, but we doubt that's the kind of comic you want to be. Even a great improvisational comic like Robin Williams writes down his material first. He has his act all planned out, then he improves around it.

### **YOUR GREATEST RESOURCE IS YOURSELF.**

- Examine your own experiences.
- Look at your eccentricities
- Focus on your point of view
- Humor is PERSONAL!!

### **HOW?**

#### 1. WAF TRAITS

Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. In the first, write down things that worry you. In the second, things that make you angry. In the third, things that frighten you.

#### 2. NEGATIVE TRAITS

Make a list of all your negative personality traits. Self-effacing humor is always safe territory because if you laugh at yourself, others will feel comfortable laughing at you too. If you're ugly, talk about it! Think of yourself as a safe venue for mocking the ugly, since you're really just making fun of yourself.

#### 3. UNIQUE TRAITS

Make a list of things that are unique about yourself, both inner and outer. Do you have freakishly large hands? An unusually high tolerance for alcohol? A phobia of eating in front of people? Or maybe you're an extremely nebbishy-looking man who has trouble relating to others. In that case, congratulations! You're Woody Allen!

### **NOW WHAT?**

- These lists will provide you with the raw material from which to write your jokes.
- **Always carry a little notebook** with you wherever you go. You never know when you'll see something funny, and we guarantee that if you tell yourself, "Oh, I'll remember it later," that you won't. Write EVERYTHING down. Even the dumb things. Sometimes bad ideas can lead to good ones.

## **STEP 3: WRITE THE ROUTINE**

What's the use of having funny material if it's floating around on post-it notes and beer-soaked cocktail napkins? To turn your material into an actual routine, you'll need to:

### **WRITING JOKES**

- Most jokes are based on the setup and punch line formula.
- First, the setup explains what the joke is about and then the punch line delivers the laugh  
Example:     Setup -            "My mother is so fat..."  
              Punch line -    "...her booty has its own zip code."
- So with the exercises you did earlier as a reference, write your jokes using the following comedy formats:

#### **Lists**

The magic number in comedy is 3. The first two are alike, but the third is the opposite.  
("Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire PR officers." -Daniel J. Boorstin)

#### **Comparisons**

Pointing out vast differences. ("My girlfriend's idea of a romantic night is a candle lit dinner and a walk on the beach. Mine is a six-pack and a bag of Fritos.")

#### **Simile**

Describing something by likening it to something else. ("He looked like a squid in stretch pants." -Judy Tenuta)

#### **Observations**

Pointing out how absurd everyday life is. ("You can't have everything. I mean, where would you put it?" -Steven Wright)

#### **Mimicking**

Making fun of someone by acting like him/her. (Your interfering mom, your whiny significant other, your pesky parole officer . . . just make sure they're not in the audience that night.)

#### **Callback**

A joke with a punch line that refers to a joke you did earlier in your set.  
("I was going to send my mom a letter, but I couldn't remember her booty's zip code.")

- After you've written your jokes, try to make the setups shorter.
- The average audience's attention span is very short, so they're not going to be able to follow a long setup without losing interest. They want to be easily entertained.

Thinking is hard, laughing is easy. Don't give them too much to think about.

## **JOKE ORDER**

- Look at your list of jokes and pick out the best, funniest one.
- Put it at the end of your routine.
- Now take your second funniest joke and put it at the beginning. That way, you start strong and end with your biggest laugh.
- The third funniest joke will go just before the end.
- The next funniest joke will go just after the first joke and so on until you've filled up your time allotment.
- The number of jokes you tell will depend on your delivery and how long your jokes are.

## **STEP 4: REHEARSE THE ROUTINE**

### **STAGE PERSONA**

Determine which comics you identify with. You should not act exactly like them, but if your comedic style is similar to theirs, chances are that your delivery and onstage attitude will be similar as well. The difference is that your unique personality will shine through, because your stage persona is really nothing more than an extension of yourself. It's what brings your act to life.

### **REHEARSE**

- Most jokes aren't about the actual words, but about how you say them, so you have to practice your material over and over again. Tell 'em to anyone who will listen (your roommate, your co-workers, that guy who works the overnight shift at 7-Eleven), and gauge their reactions to determine what needs work.
- Remember that practicing your jokes is not the same as memorizing them. If you know your material too well, you'll come across as stiff and over-rehearsed.
- Be open to improvisation. You can always pick on a poor, unsuspecting audience member if you're at a loss for words.

### **TIMING**

- There's no easy formula for learning comic timing. It's both an inborn talent and a learned skill.
- Try to get an initial feel for it when you're practicing, and gather as much pre-performance criticism as you can. After that, you'll have to rely on the criticism of a live audience.