



PUNCH UP YOUR ACT WITH COMEDY

A Comedy Primer presented by Roger Way (TVP/NC) to I.B.M. Ring #199

"Comedy is getting your audience to stand on a mental rug, then pulling it out from under them. If they see it coming, they'll move and that spoils the laugh." Gene Perret

The art of adding Comedy to your Magic requires years of study and practice to master. No one can teach you to be funny in 30 minutes. But, we can introduce the basic concepts of creating and improving the jokes used in magic today. This is a very brief overview on the most basic components of creating professional quality jokes.

THE SEVEN LEVELS OF LAUGHTER

In his book, *The Clown Star*, Master Clown David Bartlett defined seven levels of laughter. These levels construct a path telling you that you are on the right path. Think of it as a Laugh Lego Set. Start at Level One and work up...

Level 1: Physical Acknowledgement – The gentle raising of an eyebrow, rolling eyes, or lift of a chin.

Level 2: Lip Movement – The lips begin to gently curl upward just a bit.

Level 3: Forceful Exhale – This is a rapid exhale of breath as if the person was caught off guard. A mouthful of liquid is a bonus.

Level 4: Noise (Singular) – A sudden and singular "Ha!", "Tahhh!" or "Phhhhh!". Clear signs that you're getting closer!

Level 5: Noise (Repetitive) – Multiple noises or exclamations of laughter. Level Five is the desired level for most comedy.

Level 6: Spasms and Snorts – The audience loses control and cuts lose. Legs fly! Arms flail! Heads roll! Comedy Nirvana!

Level 7: Moisture – The ultimate laugh experience! Eyes tear up! Sweat builds! If they experience a sudden release of urine, you've hit a comedy homerun!

THREE TYPES OF COMEDY IN MAGIC

There are multiple styles of comedy. Comedy Magic is more closely related to Improv Comedy than Stand-up. It is very audience influenced and interactive. The primary colors of comedy magic include:

Surprise – This technique requires leading your audience down a path of thought or anticipation then suddenly jerking that path in an unexpected direction. As Gene Perret explained, getting them to stand on a rug, then yanking that rug out from under them.

"I will make a rabbit appear on your head! Ready? One – Two – Three – GRAB IT!! Do you feel the Hare?" Gene Gordon

Exaggeration – The best comedy is based on Truth. Exaggeration takes a premise that the audience can relate to through personal experience and stretches it just enough to make it fun.

"A Bee stung me once. I went straight to the beekeeper and demanded that he do something about it! He said he certainly would – if I would just point out which bee stung me." Gene Gordon

Magician in Trouble - The Magician in Trouble is one of the least respected types of comedy magic – largely because it is overused and most magicians SUCK at doing it! This premise, done right, has four steps:

The Body of the Trick

The False Climax

The Aftermath or Repairing of the False Climax

The Real Climax

The Problem: A Timing and Acting issue. Most magicians skip right past the False Climax and straight in the Real Climax. It's an Ego Thing!

Give your audience time to appreciate the "mistake"

Allow time for the audience to build empathy and tension

Don't telegraph the resolution of the effect or the real climax

Spring the Real Climax theatrically – tension is released – Laughter erupts

HOW COMEDY WORKS

"Laughter results from swinging the minds of the audience out towards an expected goal, then just before arriving, they are playfully pulled back or sidetracked to a different conclusion. Laughter results from a train of thought which is so directed that it ends in a wreck of nonsense." Tarbell Course in Magic, Volume 3



Comedians are basically actors and storytellers. We use our stories to lead the thoughts of our audiences down a delightful garden path. The laughter erupts when we suddenly divert from that path and drag their thoughts in a totally unexpected direction.

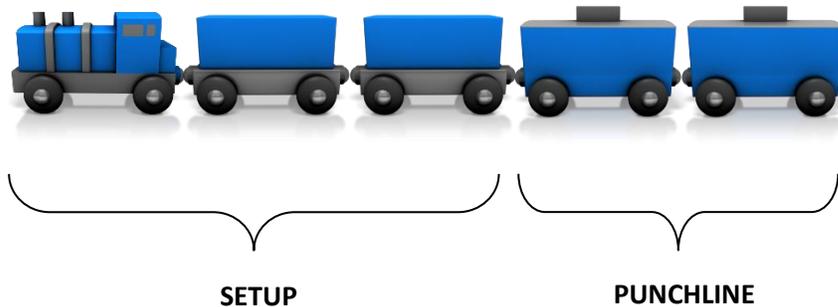
For example:

Did you know that Chinese children also play Chopsticks? Of course, they call it Knives and Forks.

My sister was so proud of her triplets! She says this happens only once in three million birth. When did she find time for housework?

ANATOMY OF A JOKE

The joke structure is very important. Each joke consists of two principle parts:



The SETUP is the serious part of the joke. It leads the audience comfortably down that garden path or normalcy. The SETUP places the audience on that comedy rug. The SETUP ALWAYS precedes the punchline. The SETUP should be short and sweet. The longer the SETUP, the more powerful the punchline needs to be to justify the audience's patience and to release their built-up tension.

The PUNCHLINE creates the mental curve leading to spontaneous. The PUNCHLINE pulls the comedy rug out from under the audience members. If they see it coming – if you broadcast the PUNCHLINE – the audience can mentally prepare for the twist and the laughter is diminished. The PUNCHLINE ALWAYS follows the setup. It should be short and sweet. The last words of your PUNCHLINE should be your MAIN LAUGH LINE!

Study the following Setup/Punchline combinations. The Laugh Line or Comedic Twist is underlined.

SETUP: *My father had a weird sense of humor. For Christmas, he gave me a bat.*

BAD PUNCHLINE: *It flew away the first time I tried to play ball with it.*

GOOD PUNCHLINE: *The first time I tried to play ball with it, it flew away!*

SETUP: *When a kid asks me where the rain comes from, I tell him, "God is crying."*

BAD PUNCHLINE: *I tell him it's because of something he did if he asks me why God is crying.*

GOOD PUNCHLINE: *If he asks me why God is crying, I say, "It's probably because of something you did."*

Underline the Laugh Line or Twist in these jokes:

I had it tough growing up. My mother was a Jehovah's Witness. My father was a Mormon. I spent my entire childhood knocking on other people's doors!

My job was to peek in the windows as Mom or Dad knocked. "They're home, Ma! I can see them hiding!"

We had to compromise at Christmas. Dad was allowed to set up a Christmas Tree. But, he could only decorate it with little Watchtowers.

Many times, a joke will be suitable for an extra punchline. This is called a Topper – as in topping the punchline. Once the laughter has started it is easier to keep it rolling. Jeff Dunham is known for adding two or three toppers to his jokes. Toppers follow the same rules as the Punchline.

SETUP: *I had it tough growing up. My mother was a Jehovah's Witness. My father was a Mormon.*

PUNCHLINE: *I spent my entire childhood knocking on other people's doors!*

TOPPER: *"...and then Mom joined Avon..."*

Jack Benny: *Here's a quarter. Go buy yourself a pair of shoes.*

Bum: *For a quarter?*

Jack Benny: *(Long Pause) You'll need laces, won't you?*

WRITING A JOKE

Writing jokes takes time and practice. The more time you spend writing, the easier it gets. When I worked comedy clubs, I would rise at 6:00 each morning, grab my coffee, and sit down at my desk with a yellow legal pad and pen. I personally found it easier and more creative using a pen rather than a keyboard.

I would pick a target and simply start free associating – writing down everything that came to my mind. I would write like this until I filled a full sheet of my pad. No format. No rhyme or reason. No judgement. Just lots and lots of words or phrases loosely or firmly associated with my target. If my target was MAGIC, my pad would look something like this:

Sorcery Witchcraft Magician Alchemy Orlando Divination Mage Wand Enchantment Potion Astrology Amulet Cards Thurston Sorcerer Wizard Spell Frazer Houdini Magus Talisman Rune Might Potter Druid Shamanism Laker Mysticism Supernatural Witch Merlin Crowley Gathering Elf Labyrinth Illusion Disneyland Parents Healing Fairy Tome Keller Mana Realism Shaman Unicorn Trick Superstition Stile Lore TV Buffy Ritual Dungeon Fantasy Invocation Charm Table Cauldron Demon Copperfield Genie Wiz Folklore Celtic Practitioner Weave Spectre Taboo Disney Cups&Balls Pug Odin Cleric Oz Mortal Faust Isis Priestess Hermes Realm Occult Magical Wizard Demonic Enchanted Adept Voodoo Supernatural Elemental Fairy Mundane Healing Potent Esoteric Blaine Ritual Gathering Mall Innate Mystical Mystic Guillotine Superstitious Police Trick Spinning Conjure Wield Invoke Heal Jail Dispel Aces Dwarf Mach Compeer Mastery Mystic Aura Parlor Vegas Magnetism Dragon Kayla Willow Conference Mystery Vestige Sword Healer Chaos Rite Centaur Avalon Troll Orb Goblin Tent Teller Feat Curse Miracle Manipulation Living Room Tale Ley Gnome Magic Secret Quest Power Seer Poison Slayer Werewolf Creature Party Monster Ninja Orpheus Circus Bard Flute Rooftop Neal Carpet Lantern Quadrant Mozart Cursing College Pritchard Nugget Raptor Festival Oracle Pony Maverick Walt Abs Gryphon Puff Amadeus Bough Vertigo Mirror Pegasus Recapture Powerful Sympathetic Ceremonial Evil Wondrous Psychic Paranormal Pagan Cunning Charmed Skilled Fantastic Mythical Tux Top Hat

I would then divide select words into a grid like this:

	DIRECT CONNECTION	OPPOSITE/INDIRECT CONNECTION
PEOPLE	Assistant, volunteer, spectator, magician, wizard, alchemist, magi, compeer, mystic, Potter	Heckler, know-it-all, hack, women, girlfriend, police, boss, teacher, kid, spouse, friend, parents
PLACES	Stage, club, restaurant, street, table, parlor, living room, party, Vegas, tent, festival, banquet	Alley, parking lot, mall, jail, prison, forest, college, school, rooftop, swamp, in-laws' home, supermarket
THINGS	Wand, cup & ball, shell, coin, card, cape, top hat, rope, fork, props, trunk, Jack, Queen, King	Ticket, pass, liquor, guillotine, tool, car, book, puddle, door, bulb, suit, vest
EVENTS	Showcase, appearance, vanish, benefit, prep, conference, TV special, interview, photo shoot	Arraignment, accident, travel, check-in, dining, flat tire, argument, weather, shopping
WORDS/ PHRASES	Do a trick, make something happen, wife or check disappear, read my mind	Kid stuff, isn't real, fake, get real job, too expensive, liar, how the \$&#! did you do that

I clear my mind and try various combinations from the grid and write down every thought that came to mind. I would refine the best of these thoughts into the joke structure. I would select the best and rewrite them into four or five different variations. On a great morning, I might find one or possibly two workable jokes. Most mornings, I simply came away with some basic ideas.

The following jokes were suggested by this grid (Laugh lines are underlined):

You can always identify a magician by the way he counts. Eight-Nine-Ten-Jack-Queen-King.

My wife HATES this bit. The only straight forks in my house are plastic. When I visit, my in-laws hide their forks!

My dry cleaner just called. "Sir, do you want this dove pressed, too?"

My parents took me to court for their college tuition money.

My home is furnished with Ethan Allen, Ikea, and Sub Trunk.

I love going through airport security. I think it's hilarious to watch the x-ray tech get that "What the \$&#!" stare!

Out of this batch, I see one or two that might have some serious value. They'll need to be reworked to get the timing just right. A couple of others have potential with some extra effort and rewriting. That is the process: Write – Test – Rewrite – Test Again – Re-Rewrite – Rinse and Repeat, as needed.

COMEDY COMMANDMENTS

There is no set formula for writing or presenting jokes. Every comedian and comedy writer has his or her own style and techniques. However, there are some helpful rules and guidelines. These rules have been tested and revised by professional comedians and writers over the past few decades.

BE ORIGINAL! NEVER EVER STEAL ANOTHER COMEDIAN OR MAGICIAN'S MATERIAL!

Nothing will get you blackballed from comedy clubs and venues faster than presenting another comedian's work as your own. Like magicians, these professionals know what their peers are doing and what is or is not available. Stealing another comedian's material and presenting it as your own is the number one taboo in comedy.

MAKE IT PERSONAL!

That said, there is nothing wrong with adapting an old, public domain joke and adding it to your act. Libraries and the Internet abound with old story jokes and one-liners. However, if you use them, personalize them and make them your own. Consider this example:

OLD JOKE:

Let me tell you about my big-spending husband," said one woman to another. "It was our anniversary, so he took me to the most famous restaurant in town and told me to order the most expensive dish on the menu. I ordered the Big Mac.

This guy was walking one day when he saw a frog. The frog said, "Hey mister, I'm really a princess. If you kiss me I will turn back into a princess and you will be a prince." The guy said, "Cooooool!", put the frog in his pocket and walked on down the road. A little while later he took the frog out and looked at it again. This time the frog said, "Really, I'm a princess. If you kiss me you will be a prince and you will be rich." The guy said, "Cooooool!", put the frog in his pocket and walked on down the road. A little while he took the frog out again. This time the frog said, "Hey mister, whats up? Why won't you kiss me?". The guy said, "Look, I'm a close-up magician. I'm not interested in being a prince, or being rich. But a talking frog, now that's Cooooool!"

PERSONALIZED:

We celebrated our 25th anniversary recently. Twenty-five years! My wife said she wanted to go to the most famous restaurant in town. I took her. Being the loving husband, I told her to order the most expensive dish on the menu. She did. Being a good sport, I also ordered the Big Mac.

I had this dream the other night! I was walking downtown and passed a frog sitting on a planter. "Hey good-lookin'," the frog said, clearly talking to me, "I'm really an enchanted princess. If you kiss me, I will turn back into a beautiful princess and I will make you my prince." I thought "Cool!" and put the frog in my pocket. As I walked, the frog poked her little head out of my pocket and repeated, "Really, I'm a gorgeous princess. If you kiss me my father will reward to with great riches and my hand in marriage!" I said "Cooooool!", poked the frog back into my pocket and kept walking. A little later, the frog poked her head out again and pleaded, "Hey, buddy! What's up? Why won't you kiss me?" I looked at the frog and said, "Look, doll, I'm a magician. I'd be an awful prince and I don't want to live in a castle. But just look what a talking frog did for Jim Henson!"

TRUTH IS FUNNIER THAN FICTION!

George Carlin said, "A comedian shouldn't just make us laugh, he should also make us think."

The audience laughs loudest when they agree with the comedian – a secret of comedy that few people realize. Remember that comedy is about building anxiety and tension then offering a release through laughter.

This doesn't mean that you can't write jokes that are total lies or fantasies. It does mean that you should give them the semblance of truth. Take the "Frog" joke above. By making it a dream, you've connected with audience members who have had odd dreams – which is just about everyone. That connection is all important. No one believes that Sam Kinison walked around yelling at people all day, but his on-stage persona and his stories sure made it look that way. No one believes that Jeff Dunham's Peanut and Walter are living beings, but Jeff's presentation and routines sure make it look as if they are.

Your jokes don't have to be true, but they need to be believable and probable in order to connect with your audience.

Suppose we needed to write a joke for a Texan audience. One of the words in our free association grid is "Ya'll." Everyone in Texas says "Ya'll." I think it's a law. It is a fact that instantly connects with everyone in Texas. Who wouldn't say "Ya'll?" Maybe a tourist? An Italian or a French tourist? What about a waiter in a French restaurant? A fancy French restaurant on top of a fancy building in Dallas? Have I ever been in a fancy French restaurant on top of a fancy building in Dallas? Nope!

So, I recently visited Dallas. Nice city. Great people! My wife and I dropped in to a very exclusive French restaurant on top of the Bank of America Plaza. Very chic! Our tuxedoed waiter appeared as soon as we were seated. He had that distinctive French mustache, that distinctive French towel over his arm, and that distinctive French body odor. With a heavy French accent, he said, "Good afternoon Mademoiselle e' Monsieur. Welcome to Café Lu Bonne. What can I get for Ya'll?" Ya blew it there, Gaston! Are ya'll from Southern France? The faded Copenhagen circle in his back tux pants pocket totally destroyed the effect.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Nothing is worse than delivering your first joke and watching it fall flat because your audience doesn't share your perspective. Jerry Seinfeld's first series of appearances in England failed miserably because the British audience had little in common with his New York based humor. Can you imagine Samantha Bee or Stephen Colbert on stage at a Republican National Convention?

Know your audience and fit your routine to that audience. I once lost a lucrative annual country club booking with this little bit:

Happy Dan: I cut the rope in the middle giving me how many pieces?

Child: FOUR!

Happy Dan: Homeschooled?

I had used that line HUNDREDS of times and it always got a strong laugh. In this one instance, a family of homeschoolers took offense at me calling them "dumb." The mother complained to the club manager and the manager tore into me. I was dumbstruck – especially because I agree with her. The statement was crass and not at all in line with my genuine respect for homeschoolers. I changed it immediately to:

Happy Dan: I cut the rope in the middle giving me how many pieces?

Child: FOUR!

Happy Dan: Common Core at work...

Same big laugh without stepping on personal toes. So far, no one has cried foul. Although, I constantly worry that some teacher or, heaven forbid, desk bound administrator might choose to take offense and confront me. Until then, common core is my whipping boy.

GIVE LAUGHS, NOT LECTURES!

Audiences want laughs. Long-winded low-impact stories, just like long-winded low-impact magic routines, bore our audiences from a state of anxiety and tension to a state of aggression and resistance. Keep your wording short, succinct, and simple!

I'm against picketing, but I don't know if I should protest with a sign or whatever.

*"I'm against picketing, but how do I show it?"
Max Headroom*

On the road into town there was a sign in an empty field that said, "Three miles ahead. Lots for Sale." So, I went to the location, but to my surprise, there was nothing there.

I saw this sign: "Lots for sale." I drove there, but I must have been late because there were only empty fields left.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING!

Timing is the tempo with which the routine is presented. Tempo is as important in magic as it is in comedy. Mastering timing is a volume within itself. It takes experience and practice to get it right – and many never get it right.

One of the chief timing elements is the pause. Pausing at the right moment for the right length of time can transform an okay joke or magic effect into a memorable moment. Jack Benny was the all-time champion of the comedic pause. Listen to a few of his old broadcasts and discover just how funny and important silence can be.

Take my wife please.

"Take my wife (pause) please!" Henny Youngman

A girl phoned me and said, "Come on over, there's nobody home. I went over. Nobody was home.

"A girl phoned me and said, "Come on over, there's nobody home. (pause) I went over. (pause) Nobody was home." Rodney Dangerfield

THE RULE OF THREE

The Rule of Three follows us all through life. In literature, movies, comedy, magic, politics ... everywhere! Three is the perfect magical number! Three little pigs. Three musketeers. Three Ghosts of Christmas. Three acts in a play. "Blood, sweat, and tears...", "a priest, a rabbi, and an imam walk into a bar..."

When using comedic lists, remember the Rule of Three:

I hate her! I can't stand her! She drives me crazy! I want nothing to do with her! She's insane! I simply can't be around her! I'm in love...

I hate her! I can't stand her! I'm in love...

I can't think of anything worse after a night of drinking than waking up next to someone and not being able to remember why they're dead.

I can't think of anything worse after a night of drinking than waking up next to someone and not being able to remember their name, or how you met, or why they're dead.

The Rule of Three applies to magic as well. Many effects present a "Try – Fail – Try – Fail – Try – Succeed" or a "Present – Repeat" formula. Repeat once may be too little. Four times becomes repetitious.

For kidshows, the Broken Wand is funny the first time it happens. It is still unexpected and funny the second time. But, if you try to push it a third time, the child – and your audience – will quickly lose patience with you. Three seems to be the ideal number for most audiences. Focus your repeat effects on "one-two-and-done."

AD-LIBS ARE NOT REALLY AD-LIBS!

Red Skelton was the Master of Ad-Libs. He always seemed to have a funny "off script" aside ready when things went wrong during his live broadcasts. Don Rickles got more laughs with his heckler shut-down ad-libs than he did from his prewritten scripts. Jonathan Winters, Robin Williams, Groucho Marx, and Alan Alda were all masters of the barbed ad-lib.

But, in nearly every case, these ad-libs were not simply pulled from the back of their wild comedic minds in a brilliant moment of comedic inspiration. The truth is that most ad-libs are honed over years of experience working before live audiences. Most ad-libs are set in stone and resting just under the surface of the performer's thought until something happens to justify their use. Red Skelton was known to write errors into the script at rehearsal just so he could fit a particular, well-planned ad-lib into the mix.

I have a list of favorite "ad-libs" that I keep ready for any opportunity to "flaunt my impromptu comedic talent." Here are a few:

If I was good, I'd be in Vegas.

Since I was a boy, I've wanted to do magic in the worst way. I've succeeded.

I just threw that joke in. I should have thrown it out.

You may laugh at this (pause) and it would really help if you would.

No individual laughing please. Stay with the group.

I'm here to prove that movies are still your best entertainment.

I'll get this right if it kills you!

That's strange! It worked when I stole it from David Copperfield.

Thank you, Mom! Would you explain it to the rest of the audience?

You're a good egg. (pause) Do you know where eggs come from?

The Boy Scouts classified me 4-F.

That's what I get for buying magic off the budget rack...

This is a funny show! I'm glad I came!

Why are you moving? They haven't thrown anything yet!

When a routine fails, your audience's anxiety increases. They may feel sorry for your embarrassment. A quick ad-lib creates laughter, relieves the tension, and allows the audience to reconnect with you. Develop and use your list of favorite ad-libs. Practice makes perfect!

KEEP IT CLEAN!

I performed with a comedy troupe named *Stand-Up Underground*. We performed at comedy and military clubs up and down the East coast for twelve years. As a family entertainer, I was the only member of the group who had a 100% clean comedy act. We were contracted to perform for the Yadkin County Sheriff's Department Christmas Party. The rest of the troupe figured their blue material would be a hit with the Sheriff and his deputies – until we arrived and found a room full of families. Our opener got up to do his 20-minute F-bomb heavy act on NASCAR, Winston Cigarettes, and Cancer. He spotted the Sheriff's father-in-law in a wheel chair with a tracheostomy bib and froze. He managed to eke out five very hard minutes of material to polite chuckles before surrendering the stage. The middle act stepped up to do his 20-minute F-bomb laden act. He was so focused on keeping his language clean that he literally forgot his act. He barely reached the five-minute mark. I stepped up and pulled off an hour of family-friendly comedy and magic.

The moral to this story is this. Blue material works in adult military and comedy clubs. It's the norm. It works! No one can doubt the power of George Carlin, Richard Pryor, or Eddie Murphy. But, not every comedy venue is Blue friendly. In fact, the high income venues require shows that are squeaky clean and politically correct! Corporate meetings, church and school events, broadcast television and radio, festivals, and public celebrations.

Jerry Carroll, the Holly Springs Wild Man, has two complete versions of his top comedy sets – one blue and one squeaky clean. Jerry is one of the hardest working and most demanded comedians in the East.

Lenny Bruce, the pioneer of blue comedy, was arrested in nearly every state for violating profanity laws, yet he delivered a flawlessly clean and hilarious performance on the *Steve Allen Show*, the precursor of Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*.

Blue or clean is your choice and one generally governed by the venues you want to work. But, if you choose to work blue, always have a squeaky clean act rehearsed and waiting in the wings.

READ – READ – READ!

This mini-lecture barely scratched the surface of the professional art of comedy. If you would like to learn more, I strongly recommend the following books:

The Comedy Bible	Judy Carter (A rehabilitated magician)
Stand-Up Comedy: The Book	Judy Carter
Stand-Up Comedy Workbook	Judy Carter
Just for Fun	Christopher T. Magician
Be More Funny!	Christopher T. Magician
Beyond Look Don't See	Christopher T. Magician
Stand Up: A Professional Guide to Comedy Magic	Ian Keable
Comedy Writing Secrets	Mark Shartz
Magicomedy	Michael Caveney
The Everything Guide to Comedy Writing	Mike Bent
Big Laughs for Little People	Samuel Patrick Smith
Comedy Writing Step-by-Step	Gene Perret
Seriously Silly	David Kaye
Supersize Silly	David Kaye