

the Cheeky Monkey

For my brother, Simon,
a very funny man

the Cheeky Monkey

WRITING
NARRATIVE
COMEDY

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Disclaimer

Much humour is inherently offensive. Therefore, this book, which aims to provide insights and techniques for the writing of comedy, includes offensive content. Potentially offensive topics discussed include, but are not limited to, race and ethnic humour; religion and religious humour; sexual, sexist and gender humour as well as vulgar language. Though offence is innate to some humour, it is not intended here.

Every effort has been made to attribute original author to quoted material, but jokes are often passed around and changed in the process, and their authorship is lost.

A note on the exercises

Sample answers to the exercises may be found in the appendix.

Introduction: The Purpose and Function of Humour

Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition. Our chief weapon is surprise ... surprise and fear ... fear and surprise.

—‘The Spanish Inquisition’, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*

One man’s joke is another man’s sentence, so finding common ground between *all* jokes seems impossible. There are, however, certain timeless principles that underlie all jokes and narrative comedy. These principles are not rules or formulae, but the framework within which comedy occurs. They were discovered by writers as far back as Aristotle, although not invented by them. Comedy goes to the core of every human being and always has. It is the world’s highest and lowest art form.

In a way, you already know everything in this book. The blueprint for creating comedy is in your DNA. If the principles seem familiar, perhaps bleedingly obvious, it’s because you know them instinctively. Humans have evolved into civilised and sophisticated beings. Comedy, however, originates from and speaks to our primate brain, the ‘cheeky monkey’ within us. If you already write comedy (and it’s funny) you’re most likely applying the principles whether you know it or not. If you’ve never written a joke in your life, applying the principles may help you get underway.

The principles of comedy writing offered in this book result from discussions with writers, producers and comedians about their craft, and from my own experience in stand-up, musical comedy and narrative comedy.

This book does not, could not, provide comprehensive definitions of every form of gag and narrative joke. Nor is it an empirical study of comedy itself. The aim is to offer comedy writers some broad principles and practical methods for devising and assessing their work.

Though many of the topics covered in this book can be applied to writing stand-up material or comic plays, stories and movies, the central purpose is to aid screenwriters in developing sitcom. This manual covers the process from the germ of an idea to a fully-fledged series ready for pitching. But be warned: those who know the principles of comedy can come to look on it in much the same way a gynaecologist looks at human reproduction: with too much knowledge to find it sexy.

There’s every chance you won’t agree with everything in this book, or even with the proposition that a valid theory of comedy is possible. But, as you’ll see from the examples in this book, countless comedians and comic writers have successfully applied these principles.

Writing comedy is not for the faint-hearted. It is one of the most challenging creative experiences there is. But it's also one of the most rewarding. Seriously.

The Principles of Comedy

For as long as it's been recorded (the earliest satires date back to ancient Greece), comedy has been comprised of a range of elements and principles that have not changed. Comedy may have a thousand skins but its bones remain the same.

Just as any story must feature a protagonist who faces obstacles to their goal, comedy relies upon a specific range of principles. These principles are based upon primal understandings shared by every human being on the planet.

Though the higher cognitive processes of the brain vary from person to person, the same raw human instincts drive us all. We all have a funny bone.

Sure, each culture may have its own comedy traditions. The Germans, despite appearances, love to laugh. They particularly enjoy *Schadenfreude*, laughter at the misfortunes of others. The Japanese have *Manzai*, a comic tradition first developed in the Heian Period (794–1185). *Manzai* features a two-man team made up of the '*Boke*' (an enthusiastic idiot with a short memory who misunderstands things) and the '*Tsukkomi*' (a dour straight-guy who constantly interrupts the *Boke* to correct him and hit him on the head with a stick). The Italians have *Commedia Dell'Arte*, a tradition dating back to the 16th century that gave birth to Punch and Judy.

Each nation's comedy traditions, however, operate on the same principles. Laughter at a man slipping on a banana peel, the slapstick of the Three Stooges and the psychological cruelty of David Brent in *The Office* are all manifestations of *Schadenfreude*. Comic duos such as Abbott and Costello, Lano and Woodley (Colin Lane and Frank Woodley) and Mark Wary and Jerry (Jason Gann and Dailan Evans) all share a similar dynamic to the ancient *Boke* and the *Tsukkomi*. Mr and Mrs Castanza in *Seinfeld* and Frank and Marie in *Everybody Loves Raymond* share qualities with the ever-battling, baby-taunting Punch and Judy.

Given these contemporary examples of ancient traditions from far-flung countries, it's clear that successful comedy is not so much about what you do, it's about how you do it. This book presents the *what*. The *how* is up to you.

Below are ten principles of comedy. They don't all have to be present in a character, scene or joke for it to be funny, and many apply equally to drama. But they represent the 'territory' of comedy. If you're laughing at something, at least one of these fundamentals will be at work.

- Comedy deals with the abrupt negation, reversal, equation, furthering or exaggeration of given elements.
- It compares, combines, associates, deconstructs or changes the context of given elements.
- It uses stories, characters, rhythms and repetition to build and then defy assumptions and expectations.
- It presents nonsense scenarios or propositions, uses random elements to create absurdities, and applies faulty logic to known absolutes or truisms.
- It inverts values, portraying the trivial as important, the irrational as rational, the incomplete as complete—and vice versa—to illuminate larger truths, or expose the fallacies in accepted truths.
- It examines human nature and relationships by distilling and compressing character and narrative.
- It offers bare truths, not fanciful escapism.
- It examines individual human behaviour, often to highlight common behaviour or broader social concerns.
- It distils complexities and makes the simple complex.
- It uses metaphor to highlight aspects of situations or themes.

Above all, comedy uses any of the above to provoke laughter through affinity, anxiety and surprise.

There isn't a successful comedian or comedy-writer on earth that doesn't rely on one or more of the principles above. The principles do not change between centuries, nations, or artists. Nor do they vary between degrees of sophistication, public taste, age, social awareness or political leanings.

Once learned, the principles can never be forgotten. The fact is, we know them already without being told. For example, if a comic hero finds a pot of gold, how long do you think he will keep it? The answer is, of course, 'not for long'. He'll either lose it, trade it or give it away. There's no way he'll have it at the end of his story, unless it's the last thing he wants.

Somehow, we all know this. It's an inevitable scenario that chimes a primal bell in all of us. A comedy-writer's job is to ring that bell like it's going out of fashion, safe in the knowledge that it never will.

The Nature of Laughter

Everyone laughs, even Methodists. Though the trigger may vary, it's a behaviour shared by virtually all human beings. The ability to laugh is deeply ingrained in our psychological make-up. For all we know, it has been with us since caves had ensuites.

Scientists, biologists and psychologists have put forward countless theories on the origins, causes and effects of human laughter. But getting a laugh is a science only comedians and comedy writers must master.

Laughter has several mysterious qualities. Like blushing, adrenalin rushes and erections, laughter is involuntary. We've all had the giggles at inappropriate times. In fact, the greater the threat of reprisal, the more we giggle. Furthermore, we can't *decide* to be amused. We might expect to laugh at a stand-up comedian, but that doesn't mean we will. Neither can we delay a laugh until we're ready—as anyone who's snorted beer out their nostrils will attest.

By the same token, we can't convince ourselves something is funny any more than we can make ourselves believe someone is sexy—unless we're drunk, and even then it doesn't always work.

Few jokes can make us laugh twice. Yet if we *do* find one, it's likely to keep us laughing for the rest of our lives, whenever we think of it.

Laughter stimulates the release of endorphins—peptide hormones with properties similar to morphine—that can lower stress levels, increase stamina and act as painkillers. A small amount of adrenaline may also be released during laughter. These are chemicals one might associate with fighting or fleeing rather than sitting and watching comedy or dining with funny friends. The descriptors for laughter and comedy also tend towards the violent. Audience members speak of comic material that is 'close to the bone', 'painful to watch' or 'so very *wrong*'. A comedian who has a bad show might say 'I died', but if the show went well they'll say 'I killed 'em', 'It was slaughter' or 'There was blood on the floor'. A comedy audience member who's had a good time might say 'I cried', 'I couldn't breathe' or 'I pissed myself'. Unless you're into sadomasochism, none of the above sound like entertainment.

So what's going on? If we have no control over when we laugh, what we laugh at and how our bodies respond to excessive laughing, then why do we seek it out?

The perspective on laughter that I have found most useful as a writer is one I like to formalise as the 'Underlying Primal Response' theory. It may be simplistic (or even completely wrong) but it works for me.

The theory describes how the key elements of humour, namely surprise and human vulnerability, generate laughter. In essence, laughter is a response to danger averted, avoided or denied.

According to the UPR theory, laughter is a primitive response to simulated danger—danger to our social status, our equilibrium or our physical survival. When we hear an embarrassing joke or a surprising punchline, only the nub of the information is understood by our primitive fight-or-flight brain. A joke that makes an unexpected connection between two otherwise unrelated things registers in the primate brain simply as 'Surprise!' in the same way that

it might register a tiger's camouflage in a bamboo jungle. Though our higher brain knows the difference between real and simulated danger, the primal brain is not geared to take chances. It initiates basic fear-and-flight responses such as making noises of alarm, releasing adrenalin and endorphins and bladder evacuation. Our conscious mind diverts this response to the laughter mechanism. As American comedian Bob Newhart says, 'Laughter gives us distance. It allows us to step back from an event, deal with it, and then move on'. We rarely laugh at the same thing twice because, having learned, we're less susceptible to surprise a second time. If we laugh repeatedly at the same thing, it's because it remains a consistent (if only notional) threat to our equilibrium.

The reason the fight-or-flight response is diverted to the laughter mechanism rather than simply suppressed is that laughter is also a social tool, helping people bond and find affinity with one another. The presence of others makes us socially vulnerable, and this may explain why we tend to laugh more when others are around. It's no accident that many sitcoms fake the group-laughter experience by using 'canned' or live-audience laughter on their soundtracks. Producers know that adding a laugh track both highlights the show's humour to the viewing public and boosts the laughs the show generates. Sixty years of broadcasting has yet to prove them wrong.

Live comedy audiences also enjoy laughing together. A sense of togetherness evolves as our private fears and weaknesses are dragged into public view. We are united by our shared vulnerability. When a comedian singles out an individual audience member for ridicule, the rest of the audience laughs, partly from relief that it's not them (although they know they remain in danger) and partly from an affinity with the victim's pain.

The victim is usually blushing and helpless with laughter. They laugh hardest when they interpret the laughter around them as essentially benign: audience identification proves that they have survived the social danger and are still part of the group. Sometimes, however, people interpret this laughter as unfriendly. That is, they feel the audience is laughing *at* them because there is something genuinely different about them. This may be why comedians tend not to pick on, say, disabled people, as this can too easily be construed as the humour of exclusion rather than inclusion.

Comedians like to pick on people who've chosen the limelight, such as celebrities or politicians, because this makes them fair game. And if an audience member provokes an exchange with a comedian by heckling, they have singled themselves out and must cop whatever comes to them.

Laughter can also signal to others that an apparently threatening situation is actually okay, as when we witness someone falling over. If they sit up and laugh, this immediately signals that they are unhurt. Likewise, to an observer, someone being tickled could look like an attack. It's only the laughter that tells us it's actually enjoyable.