

How to be funny

Woujo | 22 September, 2017 | by Woujo



TLDR: Watch funny stuff, develop your own sense of humor, focus on making yourself laugh first, use the form setup + punchline + tag, be lighthearted and positive.

I am writing this article because I have over 9 years of experience as a stand up comedian, and I have gained a little bit of success in the field.

Ten years ago, I would have told you that it is impossible to teach somebody how to be funny. I would have said that humor comes from deep within the subconscious mind and requires a very unique soup of life experiences, intelligence, and practice that you either have or don't have. As Mitch Fatel famously said, if you didn't have a fucked up childhood, don't even bother trying to be a comedian.

However, now that I have been doing comedy for a while, I have learned that it is possible to learn to become funny. I have seen terrible unfunny people become famous comedians, so it is possible, but it takes a lot of work and intelligence, and you are at a huge disadvantage if you didn't grow up around funny people or being funny.

Why is being funny attractive?

First, laughing makes people feel good.

More importantly, being funny is attractive because it shows confidence and mastery of your own emotions. To be funny, you must be able to remove yourself emotionally from a negative situation and comment on it as if it did not affect you negatively. Most of the funniest comedy is about painful, emotional topics like race and relationships, and people laugh because comedians talk about these subjects with a calmness and disinterestedness that makes people feel like everything is going to be ok. This is why many comedians are "outsiders" in society and can emotionally remove themselves from subjects (often because they emotionally damaged and have built up defense mechanisms). In many ways, a comedian is like an "alpha male" guiding his audience through a difficult situation and arriving at a happy ending.

A comedian also oftentimes says things that are not "acceptable" by society, making him look like he is breaking the conformist mold, something people find very attractive. It also makes people feel good to hear truths that they have always wanted to express but could not.

Being self-deprecating also makes one look confident because it shows that one is not intimidated or tormented by their weaknesses. You must be careful, however - you should not be self deprecating to debase yourself before women, but rather to look strong. Humiliating yourself for laughs is not a good idea.

How to be funny

The best way to learn to become funny is to watch a lot of comedy, develop your own sense of humor, and then makes jokes when you think it is appropriate. Your "own sense of humor" is stuff that genuinely makes you laugh rather than jokes that you think other people will like. The more IDGAF attitude you have, the funnier you will be, because trying to please other people is death for comedy. Nobody really understands what makes something funny, so trying to rationally analyze jokes or trying to make jokes that you think other people will like will always fail.

To find your own humor, I recommend watching lots of stand up and funny movies, hanging out with funny people, and generally finding any comedy you genuinely enjoy, even if it is memes or Youtube videos. Most people are conformist and only exist to please other people, and this conformist attitude even extends to what they find funny. They only laugh when others laugh, and they stop themselves from making certain jokes because they are worried what others will think of them. The more you can strip away this desire to please others, the funnier you will be and the more you will enjoy comedy. When you eventually perform, either on stage or in front of your friends, you need to tailor the comedy to what your

audience likes, but you must first BECOME FUNNY, and that requires figuring out what genuinely makes you laugh. And it is obviously a comic truism that the more you try to be funny, the less funny you are. You should never “try” to be funny. If you think of something funny, say it, but if you don’t, don’t feel pressured to add to the funniness.

A lot of being funny is practice. You need to be able to read your audience, know yourself, and understand the situation. Your best bet is to try jokes out, see how they do, and then adjust your jokes to people's responses. But of course - you must make yourself laugh first!

Also, don’t become the “funny guy.” Everybody enjoys comedy, but nobody wants to be around that weirdo who makes everything into a joke and is constantly trying to be funny. Sometimes people want to have a serious conversation. People that are constantly trying to be funny are clearly people pleasing, which is unattractive.

If you are truly serious about becoming funny, I recommend taking improv classes or trying stand up at an open mike. Aside from becoming funnier, you will meet a lot of cool people and develop a new sense of confidence and an “I don’t give a fuck” attitude. Stand up is the hardest kind of comedy, because you have to make a group of strangers who do not know you laugh using just words, so if you can get good at that, you can become funny in any situation.

The structure of a joke

A joke is like a mini-movie. It has a plot, characters, a conflict, and a resolution.

Most jokes use the format: Setup + punchline + tag

The setup, also called the premise, is where you introduce the situation to be made fun of. In this step, tension is created and everything is “serious”. In stand up comedy, you speak the premise but in a movie or play, the plot creates the setup. If you are hanging out with friends, the setup can be situation you are in. If you are in a bar with your friends and a guy that looks like a gay cowboy walks in, that guy walking in is the setup.

The punchline is where the tension is released. You can tell the funniest story ever but if there is no punchline the audience will not laugh. Some nontraditional comedians like Steve Martin and Andy Kaufman did comedy without punchlines by creating absurd situations which caused the audience to just start laughing after a while. This is rare, however – most jokes need a defined point to tell the audience where to laugh. In the “gay cowboy” example, the punchline could just be “hey that guy looks like a gay cowboy.”

A tag is simply another punchline that comes after the first one.

A punchline can modify the setup in many ways. For example, the setup can describe an absurd thing, and the punchline can draw an analogy to an even more absurd thing. “What’s the deal with X? That’s like if Y.”

The setup can be something serious, and the punchline a “misdirect,” something you didn’t expect.

Example: “This woman called me a faggot for not taking another shot, and I was like ‘hey calm down grandma!’”

The punchline can also just be the ending to a sentence. “Instead of gun control, we should have bullet control. Bullets should be \$5000 each.”

The punchline can also be an impression or an act-out that expands upon the situation the setup described. For example, John Mulaney has a funny joke where he talks about watching a documentary where an 8 year old child had a drinking problem. That’s the setup. His punchline is then impersonating a drunk 8 year old. In observational comedy, the setup may be the observation (remember those cheap Halloween costumes we wore as kids?) and then the punchline would be elaborations on that observation (“they had

that little piece of band holding the mask on – real high quality!”).

When telling a story, you should have at least one punchline, and hopefully more if the story is long. The earlier in the story the better because people have short attention spans.

Aside from letting the listener know when to laugh, a punchline is your “commentary” on the situation. A lot of people simply describe a weird situation and expect people to find it funny, but the “joy” of comedy comes from hearing your unique take on the situation. I don’t go to a Dave Chappelle show to hear what Dave Chappelle saw that week, I want to hear Dave Chappelle’s unique mind interpret those situations.

The elements of a good joke

Be silly and lighthearted As I explained earlier, comedy is attractive because it allows one to view difficult, complex subjects with an air of disinterestedness and lack of negative emotion. A lot of “ranting” comedians become unfunny when you sense that they are really angry about the thing they are ranting about. Similarly, I love racial humor, but if I get the feeling that the person doing the joke is actually racist or actually hates the people he is talking about, I get turned off.

The joke must speak to our strongest emotions. For people to laugh, they must first care about what you are talking about, and they are much more likely to care if they have some emotional investment in that topic, which is why jokes about sex, race, relationships, and fighting are usually the funniest. This is also why comedy is funnier if it is relatable – the audience laughs because they have experienced those same thoughts and emotions. Bonus points if the joke can turn a painful, humiliating or frustrating experience into something positive.

The joke should stimulate our emotions and our intellect. A perfect joke makes us think, is unexpected, and touches our deepest emotions. Not all jokes must carry a smart message or commentary on society, but a joke that does that is more likely to be remembered.

The joke must have a “twist” The biggest difference I see between comedians and non-comedians is that comedians can add a “twist” to their joke that non-comedians often do not. A non-comedian may say “Liz is such a ho.” But a comedian would add a twist like “Liz is a huge ho but you can’t find any guy that would admit to fucking her.” An additional twist to that joke: “Guys that have fucked Liz are like Trump supporters. You know they exist, but nobody will admit to it.” The more unexpected and wild the twist, the funnier the joke, but if you add too much twists the joke may become confusing and too hard to understand.

The joke must be simple. The simpler the joke, the more it will affect our emotions. This may seem to contradict my statement that a joke must be intelligent, and you are right. An ideal joke will work both on a stupid level but also contain an intelligent message. There are many “smart” comics who are terribly unfunny and others who are hilarious but do jokes about stupid, forgettable shit. If you can be smart AND funny, you are golden.

What makes something funny?

Nobody knows exactly what makes anything funny. Laughter is an involuntary reaction from our subconscious mind, and our subconscious mind is extremely complicated and difficult to understand. A lot of philosophers and psychologists have put forth theories, but none of them are satisfying to me. I present my own theory at the end of this article, but you should not be thinking about these theories when making jokes – you should just focus on making yourself laugh.

Superiority theory The superiority theory, first formulated by the Greek philosopher Plato, posits that laughter is an expression of delight in the downfall of others: “We laugh,” Jim Holt writes, “because these types of situations make us feel superior to other people.”

My take: This is a legit reason why some jokes are funny. It’s even better when the person you are

“superior” than is somehow an asshole or deserves the bad thing.

The incongruity theory Kant argued, contra Plato, that the essence of humor lies in “incongruity.” The scientist Richard Wiseman explains: “The idea is that we laugh at things that surprise us because they seem out of place. It’s funny when clowns wear outrageously large shoes, people have especially big noses, or politicians tell the truth.”

My take: I would add to this theory that we delight in things that are out of place because it breaks our mind out of conformist thinking. Humans naturally evolved to be conformist and to follow the tribe, so seeing something “out of place” makes us feel like we’ve seen “reality” and broken out of our slave-emotions.

The “relief” theory The “relief” theory, states that laughter is a way to relieve tension, for example, the tension caused by one's fears. Freud took this theory one step further by claiming that laughter is a means by which we release the tension of our subconscious thoughts. For example, a joke is “funny” when it discusses a taboo subject that people are thinking about but normally cannot talk about.

My take: This is a good theory but does not tell the whole story.

The “benign violation” theory According to this theory, a “violation” refers to anything that threatens one’s beliefs about how the world should be. The violation should be “benign,” meaning that it must seem okay, safe, or acceptable. A violation can seem benign in three ways: 1) Alternative norms (e.g., one meaning of a phrase in a pun doesn’t make sense, but the other meaning does), 2) commitment to a violated norm (e.g., men find sexist jokes funnier than women do), and 3) psychological distance (e.g., “comedy is tragedy plus time”).

My take: I think this theory is overly intellectual and misses a lot of the nuance of what creates humor.

The Woujo theory I simply believe that comedy is anything that makes us feel good. If there is something about the world that upsets us, especially on a subconscious level, a good joke makes us feel better about it, so we laugh.

I believe that jokes must have a “happy ending,” even if the happy ending is complicated and exists more on a subconscious level than a superficial one. For example, Louie CK has a hilarious joke about rape where he says “I am against rape, but what if I really want to have sex with somebody?” On the surface, that joke seems like an evil incitement to rape, but we laugh at the joke because it is so self-evidently absurd. The real “victim” in Louie’s joke is not the rape victim, but Louie himself, because we laugh at how stupid he must be for justifying rape like that. We also laugh because the fact that Louie makes light of such a scary subject takes away its power. Of course, these are subconscious mechanisms, and an angry blogger could easily “interpret” Louie’s joke as an incitement to rape – that’s why we need freedom of speech to protect people’s ways of expressing their art. Some philosophers have posited that there are some things you can never joke about, like death and poverty, because there is no way to “solve” those issues in a joke. I think that there is probably a way to make any topic funny, but I agree with the general idea that a joke must have a happy ending.

Another “mean” joke that I think has a happy ending is Sam Kinison’s famous joke making fun of starving African children in those “sponsor a child for 25 cents a day” commercials for living where there is no food. Superficially, it appears like Kinison is shitting on poor African children, but we laugh because he is actually providing a solution that could hypothetically fix their problem.

One of my favorite forms of comedy is commenting on something absurd, and then trying an analogy to something even more absurd. We are constantly faced with absurd situations in our life, and we cannot complain about them or even spend any time thinking about them, so when a comedian mocks these absurdities we laugh because the comedian is essentially “defeating” these absurdities for us.

Delivery

Delivering a joke well requires confidence and a clear delineation of the punchline. If you don't emphasize the punchline the listener will not where to laugh and may not even understand the "point" of the story or why it's supposed to be funny. The setup must also be told in a way that gets the listener emotionally invested in the story or joke.

Why are jokes not funny?

I've learned that oftentimes you can teach comedy better by pointing out what ruins a joke. So here goes:

- The joke is not relatable. A joke is an emotional experience, and if a person has no experience with that emotion they are not likely to laugh. A lot of amateur comedians fail because their jokes are about something that happened to them, or something that only they care about.
- The joke is too wordy. Cut out all of the extraneous words. I tell amateur comics to write your jokes down on a sheet of paper and cut out every single word that is not absolutely essential to the joke.
- The joke is too intellectual. A lot of jokes fail because they do not connect with the audience emotionally. For example, you can point out some absurdity in the tax law but nobody will care because it does not emotionally affect them. A joke can also become too intellectual if it requires so much thinking a person's emotions are not engaged or if it includes so many "twists" the user loses track of the funny part.
- The joke does not "hit" hard. Oftentimes a joke will check all the boxes but will still not be funny because it does not "hit." Yes, you've pointed out an absurdity that emotionally affects people, but its effect on people is weak so they don't really care when you "destroy" that absurdity.
- The joke is not delivered well. The joke is not delivered confidently, or the punchline trails off, or nobody is listening, it was not delivered in the right situation, etc...
- The joke makes no sense. Often a joke will be funny in our own heads, but when we tell it we fail to convey all of the relevant facts, so the audience does not laugh because they literally do not understand the joke.
- Too much build up. People have low attention spans, so if you take too long to get to the funny part, a lot of people will lose interest. Too much build up may also make the joke too complicated and difficult to follow.

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