



Give it up for comedy

A little journey into
comedy & comedy writing

Mike Casa, April 2024



Outline

1. Introduction - 5 min
2. The principles of comedy - 20 min
3. Writing & memorizing - 15 min
4. Personal key learnings - 5 min
5. Social media - 5 min

Who's this guy?



- Started with stand-up comedy **in Sydney in 2016**
- **40m+** views between Instagram, TikTok and YouTube
- **5'000 spectators** for my solo shows in venues and corporate events around Switzerland in 2023
- Self-produced with Ross Baradoy my first **comedy special** last year (on YouTube)
- ...working in the Partnering division of Roche Diagnostics during the day



What is comedy?

- Comedy is anything that causes you **laughter or amusement**
- Comedy is always **subjective**, whether people find something funny relies on their **assumptions**, their **mood**, their **understanding**, their **familiarity with the references, etc.**

“You can say I don’t find him/her funny but not he/she is not funny”



Stand-up is strongly influenced by external factors

- The **public**
 - Age, culture, social setting (corporate event with colleagues vs. a night out with friends)
 - The perception they have of you (i.e., if they like you or not)
 - Some big laughs in the audience that lose people up
 - The general energy of the crowd
- **Day** and **time**
 - Monday vs Friday
 - Early show vs late show
- The **room**
 - Low ceiling vs. high ceiling
 - Lighting in the room
 - Aseptic room vs cool hipster room
 - Noisy background vs full focus on comedy
 - Temperature
- And others!

“Comedians know if you go up 1° in temperature in the room, the laughs go down by 20%”

- Jerry Seinfeld

Making a joke

- A joke is usually structured in 2 parts: setup & punchline

“I used to do drugs. I still do, but I used to, too.”



Setup



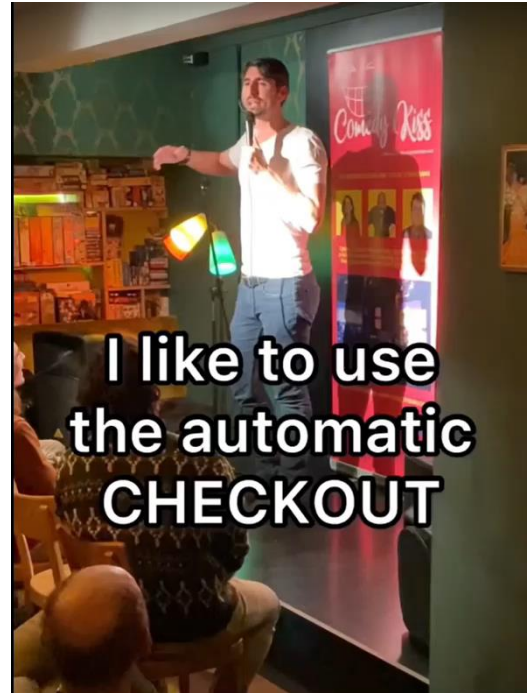
Punchline

— Mitch Hedberg

Triggers of laughter

- **Surprise** - a good twist is usually funny, especially when no one sees it coming
- **Superiority** - feeling superior to the person on stage is usually funny
- **Embarrassment** - something embarrassing is funny
- **Release** - a story that creates tension (serious story), followed by a release
- **Incongruity** - imposing characteristics - for instance giving an object thoughts, an animal speaking, or an atheist praying
- **Configurational** - the audience figure out the punchline from themselves
- **Recognition** - a basic event that most can relate to, e.g., getting a fine on the train
- **Ambivalence** - mixed feelings or contradictory ideas, e.g., being happy about a bad situation
- **Coincidence** - a causal connection between two events

What triggers of laughter are used here?





Joke structure (1/4)

Double entendres - *double meaning*

My father is against same-sex marriage. He said: "Son, you will see that if you are married for 40 years, you will find out that same-sex every night is boring as sh*t"

Triples - the 3-way build-up

People say that you cannot find everything at Aldi, and it's true: you look for coriander, you don't find it; you look for rosemary, you don't find it; you look for a normal person, you don't find it

Reverses - *switch of the point of view*

See video



Joke structure (2/4)

Simple truth - *using the literal meaning of a phrase*

Call me an ambulance - okay, you are an ambulance

Superiority - *encourage the audience to feel superior to silly thoughts or actions*

I recently downloaded "Too Good to Go", which is a great app. But I didn't know it was about food - I thought it was a dating app for people in their late 30s

Incongruity - *two logical, but unconventional ideas*

See video



Joke structure (3/4)

Paired phrases - *rhythms of antonyms homonyms and synonyms*

I have a Moroccan friend who is really racist, is part of a group, is part of the KKK. The Cous Cous Klan

Slapstick - *using physicality to make people laugh*

Examples:



Joke structure (4/4)

Recognition - analyzing an everyday or common activity

Zurich is so expensive that in other cities poor people are looking in the public trash to take out stuff, here poor people put things in the public trash to save on the zurisack

Compare and contrast - a statement that implies complexity but then is going simple

I have a Russian doctor here in Zurich, he is homosexual. I have no problem with that but it was weird because it was the first thing that he said when I met him the first time. He went like: Hallo, ich bin sehr gay

Comedy irony - using the language that normally signifies the opposite for humorous purpose

I get silly questions at the cash-out. Do you need a bag? No, I'm eating everything here

Benign retaliation - getting back at a person who did wrong

See video



Writing tips (1/2)

- To help inspiration, start by choosing **2 ideas you want to associate** and create a **list of things related to each idea**. For instance, if we want to make jokes about the Street Parade, find things related to Zurich and things related to the Street Parade; then find connections with items in the list (more in the workshop).
- To come up with items for your list think about:
 - People
 - Places
 - Things
 - Events
 - Words
 - Phrases
 - Clichés

(e.g., Street Parade: rave, messy, people from outside of the city, trucks with music,... | Zurich: clean, efficient, expensive...)



Writing tips (2/2)

- Think about **interview questions** for coming up with jokes
 - Who
 - What
 - Where
 - When
 - Why
 - How
 - ...
- **Start a sentence and try to complete it.** “Zurich is the best place for a rave party because...”
- Try to think about how can you **use physicality to enhance a joke** (act-outs)
- Reinforce your punchline **by being specific**: use more refined words, or use specific places or brand names.



Important quotes on writing

“Write, write, write” (Sam Morril)

Writing is key for 99% of the comedians. Seat down and work on ideas.

“Comedy is a muscle”

The more you train comedy, the more it will flow. Once you are trained, use it or lose it

“The ring takes care of itself” (Phil Jackson)

Put in the work, constantly - do not care if your writing produces results.

“I hate to write, I love having written” (Frank Norris)

You will not feel like writing every day, but you still have to put in the work

“The value of a comedian is proportional to the amount of good material he has”

One thing is to have 5 solid minutes, another is to put out new good material constantly -> write, write, write



Memorizing your set

- There are many strategies to memorize your set. I use the **memory palace**. A Memory Palace is an imaginary location in your mind where you can store mnemonic images.
- The most common type of memory palace involves **making a journey, through a place you know well**, like a building or town. Along that journey there are specific locations that you always visit in the same order.
- On those locations, **you place one item at a time** that makes you remember the joke.
- Try to **exaggerate the images** of the items and have them interact with the location! Moreover, try to add as **many sensory details** as possible (smells, bright colors, touch)



Learnings from the stage

- Your **2nd strongest** material at the **beginning**, your **strongest material** at the **end**.
 - *Besides putting people in laughing mode from the get-go, what people tend to remember about every performance is the beginning and the end*
- Most **edgy, vulgar, tabu material** towards the **end** of the set
 - *The tolerance of people increases with time*
- **Remove the mic stand** to not have anything between you and the audience. **Don't cover your face** with the microphone. Do not have a big beard or a cap to let the audience **see facial expression**
 - *Allow for full visibility of the facial expression and remove objects between you and the audience*
- If the stage allows, **pace on stage**, walk around
 - *People tend to be more drawn and pay more attention to moving objects*
- Look at all the audience, left and right, and alternate. **Punchline in the center**
 - *Draw the attention of the audience from the room, and then involve everyone in the punchline*
- **Ask for applause** going also by asking them and increase the room energy
 - *Raise the energy of the room with applause and making*

The phases of a comedian in stand-up comedy

1. **Phase 1** - a lot of comedians will start with simpler jokes, that can be part of a story or more often as simple one-liners
 - a. Double entendre
 - b. Triples
 - c. Paired phrases
 - d. Simple truth
 - e. Recognition
2. **Phase 2** - more complex and abstract topics (e.g., “can you imagine if...”)
 - a. Comedy irony
 - b. Reverses
 - c. Incongruity
 - d. Superiority
 - e. Slapstick
 - f. Benign retaliation
3. **Phase 3** - digging deeper: life and death, religion, ethical dilemmas, etc. using all the tools

Confidence is key for phase 2, **credibility** is key for phase 3



Social media (1/2)

- A **paradigm shift**: 10 years ago the promoters or the venues were getting people to the show, now is more and more common for the comedians to bring the people to the show through their social media presence. For instance, most of my audience comes from my social media presence:
 - 40% Instagram
 - 10% TikTok
 - 30% friends of followers
 - 20% friends' recommendations



Social media (2/2)

How does a profile get popular? A video will get pushed if:

- as a **like-per-view ratio of 15% or more**
- It is **shared many times** (~20 times per 1000 views is great)
- It has a **high retention rate** (i.e., people watch a big part of the video)
- Having a **follower base** will push video views on Instagram but not on TikTok
- **Comments seem not to make a difference** in TikTok according to research¹

[1]: Making Science Education More Accessible: A Case Study of TikTok's Utility as a Science Communication Tool, B Rein, 2023

THANK YOU!

Many of the concepts used in this presentation come from:

- Breaking Comedy's DNA, **Jerry Corley**
- Comedy writing secrets, **Melvin Helitzer**
- Hot Breath Podcast episodes, hosted by **Joel Byars**



QUESTIONS?



WORKSHOP



Jokes writing workshop

- Let's create some jokes about our reality - let's write jokes about the **Street Parade**
- We will go over the process to create jokes, everyone will then **brainstorm for 20 minutes** on jokes about the Street Parade
- You will have the chance to **say 1 or 2 of your jokes to the audience**. The best joke writer according to the audience will receive **2 tickets for one of my big shows @ SOHO Zurich**



Street Parade jokes

- Let's create a table with ideas for brainstorming:

Street Parade	Zurich
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rave party Biggest city event Half naked people Trucks ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clean Peaceful Rainy Organized ... 

- Now we will try to find words that can roll over to the other subject and clash. For instance:
 - Rave party in a peaceful city** - *"The phone lines are always overloaded at the street parade, because there are at least 100 thousand people calling the police because of the noise"*
 - Dirty street in a perfectly clean city** - *"the morning after the Street Parade you can find on the street trash and corpses of Swiss old ladies that couldn't take the sight of that mess in the early morning"*

Street Parade jokes

and/or:

- Use the [Comedy Workshop Memo Page](#) to create the lists and come up with joke with a particular structure

and/or:

- Try to start a sentence and complete it, as for instance:
 - The Street Parade could have only be done in Zurich because...
 - The people are usually naked because...
 - The day after the city is so clean and you think...
 - The people have to take drugs because...

- Let the writing flow - do not censor yourself during the first draft

APPENDIX

Writing jokes about yourself

What things make you mad?

What bothers you about yourself?

What are your weaknesses?

What are your strengths?

How do people describe you?

How would you describe yourself?

What are your likes?

What are your hobbies?

What's your favorite music?

What are your favorite games?

What are the favorite sports teams?

If you could be anything in the world, what would be?

What would you buy if you had \$1,000,000?

Where did you go to high school? What was your high school mascot?

What was unique about the town you grew up in?

What's your heritage?

Where do you work?

How do you feel about your job?

How do you feel about your boss?

Have you ever been fired from a job?

What are your pet peeves?

How would you describe your family? Large? Small?

What religion are you and do you practice?

What are your thoughts on religion?

What are your favorite parts of your body?

What makes you feel insecure about your body?