

6 Ways to Not Suck at Stand-Up Comedy

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Gladstone



I've wanted to write about stand-up comedy ever since I started doing it a few months ago. Nevertheless, as a newcomer to the craft, I didn't feel qualified to give anyone advice. My experience comes more from being funny online, and not just when I put the Groucho Marx glasses on my junk during a session of Chatroulette.

Paul Tearle/Stockbyte/Getty Images

Not pictured: my junk.

I mean it's one thing to give my weekly lecture/tutorial on how to write flawless, compelling, and hilarious articles for Cracked.com, but telling people how to be a success on stage is another matter. (By the way, I have a feeling Soren is finally going to pass my final exam, so inquire about openings for the spring semester in the forum!)

Me and my night class comedy students.

In any event, given my lack of experience, I thought I'd let some friends and acquaintances with more stand-up experience provide most of the entries on this list. I took one, and more qualified folks took the rest, and now I have an official Cracked list of tips for not sucking on stage. I give you six mistakes to avoid in comedy.

#6. Picking the Wrong Material for the Wrong Crowd

In my short time doing stand-up, I've learned that every room has its own vibe. Older crowds, younger crowds, hipper crowds, dumber crowds. You're not doing your job as a comic if you're blind to that. Although you might polish your set, you need to tailor your material to the people you're trying to get a laugh from. I'll admit that I don't really like that. I like telling jokes the way I think they're funny, and if I didn't think that I was a better judge of that than anyone, I probably wouldn't have the balls to go on stage in the first place. Still, that's the wrong attitude. No one asked you to get up there. No one likes pandering, but if you want these people to laugh, you might have to meet them halfway, at least.

This takes us to an open mic I did a couple of months ago at Beauty Bar in New York City. It's a weird little bar, converted from a former beauty parlor, and you can still get your nails done there. Consequently, it's kind of a younger, hipper, less penis-based crowd than some other rooms. I was prepping for a gig, so I did five minutes of my set mostly about the silly things women do on social media in order to make themselves look attractive. (A lot of this material was also in a [Cracked column](#) I wrote around the same time.) I made fun of profile pics that just show one eye, or big pouty lips, or sexy shoes, and explained that those were all bad ideas for attracting men.

What happened?

Well, on Cracked, the column did pretty well. Yes, some women were pissed at me, because they felt that as a man I was objectifying women under a deluded belief that they worry about their profile pics

for the sake of men. Online, I didn't care about those complaints. First, I have a 10-year published body of work, and I couldn't be exhausted enough to explain why my words should not be interpreted in the most offensive way possible when my jokes were not really specific to gender. I also don't believe that people aren't interested in making others think they're attractive. Male, female, straight, gay, whatever. Everyone does it. And I'd freely admit (as I did in the column) that I'm the absolute worst offender of such needy, wanton narcissism.

For example, here's a picture of me with my Twitter link included for no good reason.

But you can't have that discussion on stage. On stage, people laugh or they don't. And the people in that audience didn't know me or my body of writing, just what they heard right there. And to them some aging male fuck was talking down to them about how silly, ugly girls are tricking the world into thinking they're hot. And it did not get laughs. I should have been more sensitive to the audience -- probably avoiding the material altogether -- but at the very least tweaking it. And in my next performance, I did tweak it before going on stage at a different club, and it did much better.

#5. Don't Turn on the Crowd

OK, I just blew my wad with what I've learned in my three months of stand-up, so it's time to turn it over to others. Our next list entry comes to us from New York-based comic [Bread Foster](#), who runs the "No Apologies" show at Gotham Comedy Club. I've never written an article full of quotes, and I'm not going to start now. I'm not a journalist, or even sober. Journalism bores me, so let's just say I was recently talking to Bread while tag-teaming supermodels on a pile of cocaine and candy, and here is an unreliable paraphrase of his thoughts on the matter:

"Sometimes an audience needs to be woken up, but there is a fine line between crowd work and alienation that makes them hate you," Bread said while prepping the cocaine/candy pile for our female companions. "I recently played an engagement party where the groom got too drunk and started booing all the comics. I got mad and insulted the whole wedding party."

Jupiterimages/Comstock/Getty Images
The cocaine was still on its way.

"And how did that go over?" I asked while handing Bread his Superman cape. (I should have mentioned earlier that Bread wears a cape while having sex with supermodels.)

"Yeah, it went over as well as a miscarriage," he said. "So I did five minutes of self-hating material until the best man said, 'We hate you so much,' and I agreed."

"Oh?" I said, but I wasn't really listening, because cocaine/candy/sex.

"Yeah, it was smooth sailing from then on."

The next morning, I thought about what Bread had said as I stood in line for free penicillin at the VD clinic. He had an excellent point.

#4. Know How to Die

Even great comics occasionally fail on a stage. A joke is off, a word is wrong, the setup wasn't properly established, you're doing comedy at a heavy metal bar. There is no shortage of reasons you might fail to get a laugh, and handling that is an important part of comedy. That's probably why "handling failure" was the response from three of the comics I spoke to on the subject.

Kevin Winter/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images
Not these guys.

So let me set the scene. You're at your gig or your open mic and you unfurl your new bit that you've

successfully tried in your apartment countless times, much to the delight of your hot plate and cockroaches. But you go up on stage and it just dies. What DON'T you do?

Well, according to my buddy [River Clegg](#), who runs the "Buckets O' Buckets" open mic at 11 p.m. at the Creek and the Cave, don't apologize. Don't flounder around all self-deprecatingly. Just move on. No "Off to a good start" or "Oh, well" or "Whaddya think? Not so much, huh?" A lack of confidence just drives an audience further away. (Also, invite River to your gigs -- he will laugh at all your jokes, because he is the nicest person alive.)

[Paul Schissler](#), who books the great "[OverExposed](#)" show at Bareburger, has different advice: Don't tell the audience they're wrong for not laughing. "One thing that irks me," Paul said to me while eating a delicious meatless burger at affordable prices, "is when a joke bombs and the comic is like, 'Really? That one usually kills!'" Paul's right (and not just about the hidden dangers of red meat). No one likes to be told they're wrong, ever. About anything. Ever. That won't fix your problem.

And that brings us to the consummate professional, Andy Engel, who books the "Upcoming Talent Night" at [Gotham Comedy Club](#), as well as offers a [class for burgeoning stand-ups](#). Like River and Paul, Andy stresses the importance of knowing when to let something die. If a bit isn't working, go home and fix it, but don't flounder around in a free-form exploration in front of the audience. And don't go long with more material seeking that one big laugh you didn't get. It missed. Accept it. Work for next time.