

# The comedian's toolbox

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Richard Herring and Jo Caulfield

Comedic formulae must be used carefully and subtly, because the more they are used the more familiar and predictable they become and thus the less effective. You will need the misdirectional skills of a magician to hide the approaching gag.

## Rule of three

Grouping items into threes can provide a satisfying pay off. The first thing in the list introduces the idea, the second thing reinforces it, but then the third thing (using the comedic law of surprise) deviates from what is expected.

Here's Woody Allen: "By love, of course, I refer to romantic love - the love between man and woman, rather than between mother and child, or a boy and his dog, or two head waiters."

## Pull back and reveal

A term derived from the TV practice of panning out from a close-up to discover a humorous situation. Essentially you are holding back a piece of pertinent information until the end of the story.

In the wrong hands this is a hackneyed and predictable technique, with clichéd punchlines including, "then I got off the bus," and "that was just the teachers!" But used with skill it can be sublime, as with this opener from the visually startling, dishevelled Michael Redmond, "People often say to me ... get out of my garden."

## Puns

It is difficult to get away with too much word play in a stand-up set, as most puns are fairly corny or obvious, though if you are relentless and unashamed it can be quite infectious. Discovering a new pun can be very impressive. This from the brilliant Milton Jones:

"While I was in Australia I learnt some Aboriginal words like 'boo', which means to 'return' - cos when you throw an ordinary meringue ... "

## Observational comedy

Observational comedy essentially involves saying "Did you ever notice?" and then recounting something that will hopefully be universally familiar, but that won't necessarily have been consciously noted by your audience. If it's too obvious an observation it won't be funny (Have you ever noticed how buses always come in threes? Yes.) and if it's too oblique then it won't hit home. Jerry Seinfeld is the master: "Did you ever notice when you blow in a dog's face he gets mad at you? But when you take him in a car he sticks his head out the window."

## Character comedy

It's tempting to try and hide behind a false persona on stage. But creating a character that will work in a stand-up situation is a lot more difficult than just being yourself. For every Alan Partridge and John Shuttleworth, there are a thousand men in funny hats and long coats, trying and failing to be E L Wisty. It is a better idea, when starting out, to make your persona merely a slightly funnier or exaggerated version of yourself. But if you really want to go down the character route then make sure you are capable of stepping outside of the script and engaging the audience. Then do a lot of work on creating

a persona that is three-dimensional and original.

### **Saying the unsayable**

Performers such as Chris Morris and Brendon Burns challenge an audience's preconceptions by shocking them. One of the functions of comedy is to act as a release valve. When we laugh at something sick or horrendous it takes away some of our anxiety, even if it is only for a few minutes.

But even in the hands of an experienced comic, joking about such topics as paedophilia, racism, rape or cancer can go horribly awry. It is best avoided completely as a novice, but if you insist on trying then do not be offensive just for the sake of it, try to make some kind of point. And know what that point is, so you are able to justify your material.

### **Dealing with hecklers**

This is usually easier than it appears, though occasionally nothing you do will make a persistent drunk shut up (put "Richard Herring heckler" into YouTube to see me struggling with such a sot).

There are some useful stock lines which you can employ:

"This is what happens when cousins marry."

"I remember when I had my first drink."

"It's annoying isn't it? You start up a really good conversation and someone builds a comedy club around you."

But in most cases you're actually better off if you just calmly respond to whatever is being shouted at you with the first thing that comes into your head. Audiences are much more impressed with improvisation than with prepared put-downs, and the chances are that the heckler is much drunker and far less funny than you.

Most importantly, try not to lose control of the situation. In the YouTube exchange you can see that I am furious about the guy wrecking my act, but I just about manage to stay in command.

### **Exercise: Comedy blogging**

Write a blog. Take one amusing thing that happened in your day and try to describe it. You will normally really struggle to think of anything and be forced to examine the minutiae of your life, but you might recall something that passed you by at the time.

If you are stuck write about something mundane and look for the ridiculousness in something you take for granted. I have been writing a blog daily for six years ([richardherring.com/warmingup](http://richardherring.com/warmingup)) and have generated a huge amount of material for stand-up. One unpromising sounding entry about a checkout girl commenting on my purchase of nine yoghurts developed into a 40-minute routine.

### **Jo Caulfield on how to write a joke in 10 steps**

1. Choose your subject (for example, vacuous celebrity culture)
2. Define your attitude. How does the subject make you feel? Happy? Sad? Angry? A passionate point of view makes a joke stronger.
3. Write as much as you can about your chosen subject. Use similes, oxymorons, cliches, proverbs, double entendres, whatever you want. Make lists of people, places and things associated with the subject (eg Jordan, Kerry Katona, Big Brother, Paris Hilton, Heat magazine, BBC3, Lily Allen, Pete Doherty, her with the rats maze hairdo and tattoos, Heather Mills buying a shoe).

4. Cast your eye over what you've written and the funniest bits will stick out. Those are the bits you want.
5. Edit, edit, edit. Cut away as much as possible. Your mildly amusing two-page story can become a fantastic one-line joke.
6. Misdirection. Inflate the balloon. Lead the audience as far away from the joke as you can: "Me and my friend Allison (\*) have been invited to a fancy dress party ... we're going as Paris Hilton and Jodie Marsh."
7. Time for a PAUSE. What you don't say is just as important. The audience thinks quicker than you can speak so let them conjure up their own pictures of a fancy dress party.
8. Quickly spin them in the opposite direction and burst the balloon. "I'm getting a lobotomy and Allison is having her vagina widened." Almost there.
9. Listen to the audience. Audiences will help you write the joke. Originally Allison and I were going to be John Leslie and Ulrika Jonsson, then we were going to be Lembit Opik and Abi Titmuss. It was the British public who, after much trial and error, chose "Paris Hilton and Jodi Marsh".
10. Jokes don't obey no rules of English grammar, baby.

PS: Always put the punchline at the end, don't laugh at your own jokes, don't get them wet, keep them out of strong sunlight and never feed them after midnight.

(\*) I'm aware that it should be "My friend Allison and I ... " but ...

· Jo Caulfield was a gag writer on all five series of the BAFTA award-winning show So Graham Norton.