

Writing Advice: Getting Ideas



WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT SOMETHING?

An audience are listening to YOU. They want to know YOUR take on the world, and about YOUR experiences.

WHAT MAKES YOU LAUGH?

Talk about that. At the very least YOU have to be interested in what you're doing onstage. Have you seen/heard/read something funny, or that you can talk about in a funny way? Did you see someone get hurt (but not too seriously)? Can you re-enact the moment?

WHAT ARE YOU INTERESTED IN?

If you have a passion for a subject - be it a videogame, the environment, a TV show, a historical figure, etc. - then you can use your time onstage to talk about it. You can convey your enthusiasm so as your listeners want to know more. You can also make yourself into a low status fool by banging on about something unusual BUT in doing so you are teaching the audience enough about that very subject to understand your jokes on it (thus 'having your cake and eating it').

WHAT ARE YOU INFURIATED BY?

Someone going purple over a frustration can delight an audience. They may also be enraged by the same issue, and are happy you think as they do; if not they can find you - being so very cross - hilarious. Think about: manners, spelling, grammar, lies, adverts, lyrics, stupid sayings, etc.

READ THE NEWS

Newspapers can be a great source of comedic inspiration. Summarise a story, quoting things said which have struck you as silly/outrageous/rude etc. Then give your opinion; imagine *what next if [???* is true. Of all the broadsheets, The Daily Telegraph is particularly good for small silly stories. Remember, material about big news stories will only stay topical and fresh for a short time and then you should stop doing it; jokes about less well-known stories have a much longer shelf-life.

LISTEN TO PEOPLE

People are amazing. Write down what they say, if it tickles you. Is it stupid? Ridiculous? Hilarious? When you repeat their words onstage, add your own comments; imagine what they will say/do next; don't just quote them, but use their words as foundation blocks to build your material on.

WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TO A SUBJECT?

Your point of view is what makes a joke funny. When you are writing material, frame it with your particular perspective. What is scary, difficult, stupid, ridiculous or odd about your chosen topic? Can you make that attitude come across to the audience, with your words and your tone of voice? The simplest way is to say something like "do you know what's weird about...?" but you could also imply you find something odd by the way you talk about it and the faces you pull.

Get started by thinking about what is scary, difficult, stupid, ridiculous or odd about:

- public places: school, zoos, the street, supermarkets, buses, trains, the dentist, libraries
- rooms in your home: kitchens, bathrooms, hallways, living rooms, bedrooms, store-rooms
- elements of your life: being your age, having your teachers, having siblings or not

BE PREPARED TO LIE OR EXAGGERATE

Very few comics tell the absolute truth onstage. This is because real life seldom hands you perfect anecdotes. Sometimes you might need to change what was said to who, add in extra details, or combine several different incidents so as they seem like they happened on the same day.

CHECK YOU ARE BEING ORIGINAL

Use the internet to make sure your joke has not already been thought of; Google it. Do a quick keyword search on Bluesky or Twitter/X when a news story has broken, and see if you are the first to come up with that particular joke. Test your gags on someone who has seen a lot of comedy. Remember: nicking material is the biggest no-no there is in modern stand-up.

Be original. Be funny. Listen to people. Observe. Trust yourself.

Performance Advice: On The Stage



COMMAND ATTENTION

The audience should WANT to listen to you, right from the first moment they see you. Either be friendly, likeable and confident - and relax the audience by how at ease you seem to be - or be too scary, intriguing, peculiar or unusual to ignore.

Think about how teachers, politicians, tour-guides and other stand-ups succeed (and fail) in grabbing attention. Remember that raising your voice is not necessarily the best way to do this.

YOU CAN FAKE CONFIDENCE

Stand up straight, with your shoulders down and head held high. Keep your feet apart, planted under your hips; try not to shift your weight from side to side, but stay centred. Look directly into the audience and smile; breathe calmly. If you seem confident the room will think you are confident which will make you genuinely confident; even if you are pretending you can convince them.



THINK ABOUT HOW YOU LOOK

The audience will be trying to figure out what sort of a comedian (and person) you are from the second they can first see you, taking clues from your body language and appearance. Think about how you will get onstage; if you walk confidently the audience will relax more than if you scuttle on nervously, with hunched shoulders. Think about your clothing too; will you dress up, or just wear your normal stuff? If you are pretending to be a character - like Al Murray the Pub Landlord - or a weirdo - like Milton Jones (pictured left) - you will need a special outfit, and maybe a special hairdo too.

LOOK AT THEM

Do not just look at the floor, or your watch, or your notes; look at the people watching you onstage. An audience can feel ignored (then restless, then bored) if they think you are not paying them enough attention. Mentally divide the room into sections, and try to look at each in turn: the sides, the middle, the front and the back, and if there is an upstairs level, the upstairs as well. People will feel involved if you look their way occasionally, even if the lights are too bright to actually make out their faces; you do not have to make eye-contact, but can cheat by looking at the gap between peoples' eyebrows, which makes them think you are looking right at them.

You can make the audience feel like co-conspirators too, if you catch their eye while shrugging about an idiot in the room, or roll your eyes about some shared frustration.

USING THE MICROPHONE

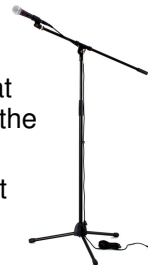
The microphone should be held underneath your mouth, preferably below your chin so people can still see your lips moving. You will be heard if you speak normally; you do not need to shout.



USING THE MICROPHONE STAND

It is a good idea for new comedians to keep the microphone in the stand, in the centre of the stage; it stops you from wandering around, and from staring at your feet. If you need both hands free - to act a scene out or hold something - the microphone will have to be in the stand. Remember this when rehearsing.

If you are keeping the microphone in the stand, you can adjust its height to suit you. Some stands are I shaped, and there will be something to twist or a button to press to lower or raise the pole in its centre (pictured left). Some stands are T shaped (pictured right), and you can just pull the top bar towards you.



NOT USING THE MICROPHONE STAND

With one hand on the stand - for stability - use the other to pull the microphone out of the clip it's held in. Don't pull it directly into your mouth, that will hurt. Imagine you have a parrot on your shoulder - like Iago in 'Aladdin' - and are trying to knock him off with the microphone.

If you are not using the stand, move it over to one side of the stage, so the audience have nothing between them and you. It can be oddly distracting if it stays on the stage in front of you.

BE AWARE OF SIGHTLINES

If there are pillars / tall people in the room, some of the audience may not be able to see you. Move around a bit. But do not wander aimlessly back and forth, as it can make the audience dizzy/distracted and they will not be concentrating on what you are saying.

LIGHT

If you want the audience to see you - and you should – then stay in the light.

REMEMBERING YOUR LINES

Write notes on the back of your hand, as a prompt. Key words should remind you of jokes.

If you have props onstage – such as a book, magazine or bag – you can have notes hidden inside. Some singers tape lyrics to the top of a guitar, as actors hide their lines in a newspaper.

If you are telling a story with pictures – like Bec Hill in this photo (right) – each page will remind you where you need to go next.



USING PROPS

If you have props, think about how to get them onstage, how to reveal them, and how you will get them off the stage once you have finished. Will you ask to go on last before the interval, so you have time to clear up, or pour everything into a bag/cart? You may need to commentate on your tidying, too. Audiences might steal stuff if they get hold of it; be wary of throwing things into the crowd. Pictured left is comic Ben Target packing away his props into a suitcase; the contents are neatly ordered, so he can find things easily at the next show, and also so that everything fits.

HIDE NERVES

Your hand might shake if you are nervous or full of adrenalin. People will only notice if you are holding something flimsy like a piece of paper. If you need notes, put them in a solid book so they can't rattle in your hand, or lie them flat on a high chair/table. Just knowing you have notes with you, even in a pocket, can help you not to need them.

PAY ATTENTION TO BODY LANGUAGE

If an audience is getting restless or bored – fidgeting, checking the time, texting, talking – you need to notice and get them to focus, maybe by doing other material, or by changing your energy levels. Don't worry if the audience are quiet. Some people are not big laughers, and if they are tired or spread out over a room rather than all sitting together in a block they may not feel comfortable in hooting their enjoyment. They are still listening; you just cannot hear them smiling. Don't tell people off for being quiet; that will not encourage them to giggle louder.

MAKE IT SHORT

Too much waffle will not help you to get laughs. Edit. Take out unnecessary detail; see how much you can remove and still have what you are saying make sense. A lot of stand-up comedy is in making the audience picture what the act is saying, creating funny visuals in their imagination. We need to know what is happening in your jokes and stories, who is talking to who and where it happened, but we don't necessarily need to know *absolutely everything* for you to set the scene.

STICK TO YOUR TIME

If you are booked to do five minutes, do five minutes; do not outstay your welcome with your audience (or the other acts on the bill). Leave the audience wanting more! Wear a watch, or set your phone to vibrate as a warning that you are nearing the end of your time. A lot of clubs will flash or wave a light at you if you should finish up.

ENJOY IT

To have an audience's attention, and to make them laugh, is a wonderful thing. And remember: not everyone is brave enough to get up there to start with.

General Advice: Being A Good Comedian



KEEP YOUR EARS OPEN

Listen to people when they give you advice, for you can keep it. And when they are chatting to others, for they may say something you can use in your comedy set.

BE YOU

You should sound like you, onstage. It will help to make you stand out. Be wary of copying your favourite comedians' way of speaking, or moving; Michael McIntyre isn't successful because of the way he zigzags onstage, but rather the stories he tells and the way he tells them. Do what YOU think is funny; it will be more satisfying for you than saying what you think someone wants to hear.

THINK ABOUT YOUR UNIQUE SELLING POINT (USP)

What makes you YOU? How would you describe your onstage persona? What makes you different from the other stand-ups out there? Do you want to play up to that? How? Someone under 18 doing stand-up is unusual, even at our gigs. If you are performing to a non-family audience you will need to think about how you address that, if at all. Contextualise yourself.

SEEK OUT OTHER ACTS & LEARN FROM THEM

See what they do well, and what they don't.

Go to the Edinburgh Festival, watch shows and try to get on shows.

Listen to our Radio Nonsense podcast to find people you think are funny.

Listen to the interviews on Stuart Goldsmith's Comedian's Comedian podcast (beware of swears) to find out more about how comics write and work.

Absorb as much as you can, and make sure your jokes or ideas have not already been thought of by others.

Treat YouTube as your friend: there are so many wonderful comics and sketch groups out there, and the fact that you may be in the wrong country or the wrong

era will not stop you from watching their work. Acts like Howard Read (pictured above) have put clips of his shows with Little Howard online, as well as video diaries and a lockdown special: <http://www.youtube.com/user/howardread>

We have put together some YouTube playlists of funny people, which you can find here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/comedyclub4kidsUK/playlists>

Older readers will find many excellent lessons & tips in Adam Bloom's book Finding Your Comic Genius. For younger readers, Harry Hill has written fun novels about kid stand-up Matt Millz.

CHOOSE YOUR TARGETS WELL

People will relish hearing you mock the rich and powerful, as you are taking them down a peg or two. The same is not true if you make poor and vulnerable people your punchline/punchbag. The audience needs to understand the intention behind a joke to be comfortable with the joke. If they think you genuinely believe the horrible things you are saying, they will not enjoy your set. And if you do a foreign accent that does not match your skin-tone the audience can be too busy worrying about whether you are about to be racist that they will stop laughing. As a broad rule, don't do the voice if you're not from there.

REVISE YOURSELF; REVISE YOUR SET

Record your gigs, particularly if you are trying new material. You will think of things onstage you might not remember otherwise. Watching yourself perform can show you the things that do and do not work; the right phrasing on a line or the wrong way to stand.

BE EARLY

Or at least be on time. If you are late you worry the people running the gig; let them know if you are stuck somewhere. Politeness counts for a huge amount. You want the good kind of reputation.

Be original. Be funny. Listen to people. Observe. Trust yourself.

