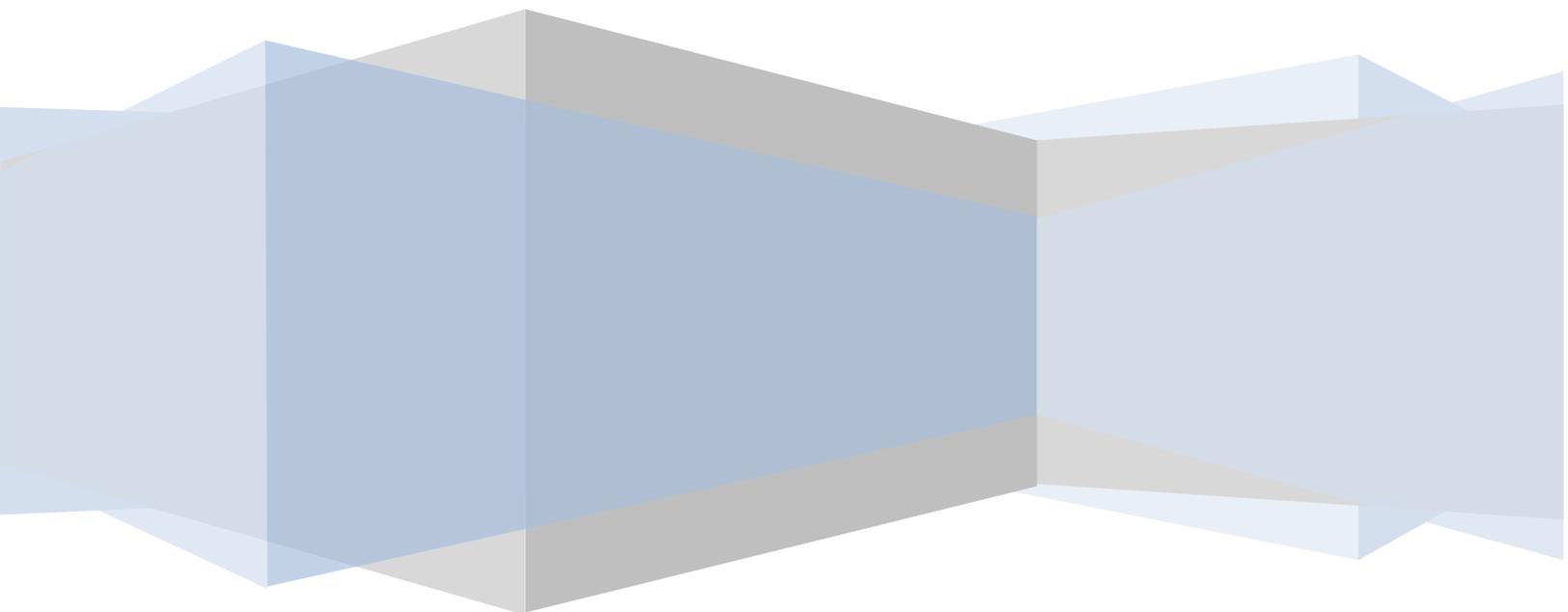


The Stand Up Comedy Clinic | Breakthrough Comedy

13 Major Comedy Structures

Breaking the comedy DNA!

By Jerry Corley



13 COMEDY STRUCTURES

For years comedians and humor writers have argued that there are only a few jokes. What they mean by that is that there are only a few types of joke structures or formulas. These are like a musician's scales. You learn to play them and you can build any song with them. In your case you'll be building comedic bits, stories and acts.

You'll notice that the underlying framework of all the formulas is to **set up an assumption and shatter the assumption**. Or create *surprise* by making the audience think that you are going to say or do one thing, then doing another. Most comedy formulas have this underlying element of shattering an assumed expectation to get a laugh using the following formulas:

- **DOUBLE ENTENDRES** – the plays on words that include cliché reformations and take-offs..

Double Entendre Examples

John McKay, former head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers was having a horrible season. The team couldn't do anything right. During a press conference after a loss, the press asked McKay a question: "What are your thoughts on the execution of the offense?" McKay responded, "I'd be okay with that."

Could you see how this double entendre formula could be used in script writing in a variety of scenes using different subject matter?

- **REVERSES** – trick the audience by a last second switch in the point of view.

"I woke up in the hotel and the housekeeper was banging on the door, just banging...finally, I had to get up and let her out!"

I was trying to teach my daughter how to tie her shoes and she's like: "I can't Dad, I can't! I said, "How many times have I told you not to use that word... I am not your Dad!"

I went to my girlfriend's house to beg her to take me back. I was banging on the door, yelling, "Stacy! Stacy!—which is weird, 'cuz her name is Emily.

I've been losing my hair. Does it bother you? It bothers me—not your hair loss—mine! One time would be like in the mornings when my wife is running her fingers through my hair—but I already left for work!

See how the listener or reader gets a visual image of "running her fingers through my hair...?" Then the image is shattered with "...but I already left for work..."

- **TRIPLES** – also known as the 3-way build up. They build tension and manipulate the framework toward an expected result by using two seemingly logical words followed by a third absurd exaggeration, thus shattering the assumption of the implied framework.

"Did you know that 'Synistriphobia' is the fear of having something to your left side. 'Dextraphobia' is the fear of having something to your right side. What's the fear of having something behind you? I guess they call that 'homophobia.'

Or this triple, the one that got me a job writing for The Tonight Show with Jay Leno:

"Oahu, Hawaii lost power to the entire island. Yeah, Traffic lights were out, Court buildings were shut down, and a vacationing Don King was seen with flat hair."

- **INCONGRUITY** – when there are two dissimilar ideas converging into one idea. Otherwise known as juxtaposing contrasting elements. The incongruity structure is commonly referred to as associative comedy or

association. This can be accomplished through statements, descriptions or character act-outs. Simply put, take two things that normally don't go together and put them together.

The incongruity joke structure is one of the most commonly used structures in comedy.

I saw a Chinese Restaurant with a sign that said, "Authentic Chinese Cuisine—Se Habla Espanol."

The incongruity formula is one of the most popular formulas in comedy today. Comedians use it all the time when they give a human quality to inanimate objects. Jerry Seinfeld, for example:

"I don't think horses know they are racing. I think the horses are standing there thinking. "I know there's a bag of oats at the end of this trail and I want to get there first."

- **SIMPLE TRUTH** – is a lot like double-entendre but it uses phrases. It takes the implied truth of the phrase and then the comedian presents that phrase in the comedic or "simple" truth what the words could also mean.

"I remember the first time I had sex. It's right there on my credit card statement."

The legendary Steven Wright used this joke:

"This morning, my girlfriend asked me if I slept good. I said, "No, I made a few mistakes."

"My father was a bastard! He wasn't a bad guy, he just didn't know his Dad."

Simple Truth often uses lyrics, scripture, poetry and metaphor:

*If you've been to Disneyland you've heard the song, 'It's a Small World'
The lyrics go,
"It's a world of joy, it's a world of tears.
It's a world of hope, it's a world of fears..."
Isn't this a song about being bi-polar?*

- **SUPERIORITY** – that encourages the audience to feel superior to silly thoughts or actions, i.e.: self-deprecation, attacking authority (cops, politicians, etc.), or attacking people that think they are better than others.

*"I saw this guy at the coffee shop and he had this big wallet tucked into his shorts...you know those big wallets with the chain connected to it and then the chain connects to the pants—like someone's going to try to steal it from him in the first place? Connected to the chain were some keys. Well his shorts kept coming down and he looked really uncomfortable. So I said, "Dude, you know you have a pocket on the right side of your pants. Maybe you could put your wallet there." He was like, "Then my keys would be on my right side."
I'm like, "So?"
"Then you're a fag!"
"What? You mean if you wear your keys on your left side, you're straight, but if you wear your keys on the right side you're gay?"
He said, "That's right."
I said, "Dude, where I come from, if you wear keys at all...you're a janitor!"*

- **PAIRED PHRASES** – that utilize the rhythms of antonyms, homonyms and synonyms. Also, it's common that the paired phrase rhythm can present us with a paradox and audiences love paradox.

"Presidents Obama, Clinton and Bush joined together to raise money for the victims of the earthquake in Haiti. But they will be going under the nicknames of "HOPE," "GROPE," and "DOPE."

Or this one from my student Patrick Kanehan:

"You know the L.A. Times recently said that you could buy happiness for seventy-five thousand a year. I'll take mildly pissed off for thirty-five."

- **SLAPSTICK** – that uses physical comedy and “stupidity” to make the audience feel superior by “acting out” the joke. Today, slapstick is more or less a simple act-out. Although some comedians still effectively use the broader physical comedy, but usually the broad physical comedy is reserved for sketch or live-action comedy rather than stand-up, but it’s not ruled out.
- **OBSERVATION-RECOGNITION** - When you discover something we do in our everyday lives and put it under a magnifying glass reliving it for the audience with a little exaggeration. Observational humor is very powerful. Especially when you really key in on something that is **recognizable** by your audience. You can either observe everyday things. Signs, or commercials or complications:

Instructions for plugging in a USB jack: Attempt to plug in. Turn over, attempt to plug in again...turn over, attempt to plug in again.

Is it me or is removing the cellophane from a CD just a practical joke?

How come dogs never have boogers in their noses, yet they have boogers in their eyes? Why? And don't their noses remind you of little electrical outlets? You just want to plug things in.

You ever blow your nose and it is so successful, you just want to do it again?

...and why do we always look at the handkerchief after we blow our nose?

I saw this commercial, it said, "Ex-Lax, works overnight by 8AM... what if you oversleep?"

You ever see that commercial for Cialis? It says, "If you experience an erection that lasts more than four hours, call your doctor. Hey, if I experience an erection that lasts more than four hours, I'm calling everyone."

The best comedians also remember to include behaviors. When identifying humor in their everyday lives:

"Dear Abby, this guy I've been seeing has gotten me pregnant. I want to have an abortion but I'm not sure our relationship is at the level to discuss money..." "When his dick went into your vagina...the relationship is at that level."

Boyfriend - Girlfriend – you know you're in for a long night when your girlfriend says to you, "Can I tell you something and you promise not to get mad?"

My mother is eccentric: she called the other day and was like, "I think your sister's ex-husband wants to kill her." I said, "Mom, did you call the police?" She's like, "No, he still owes her money!"

- **COMPARE & CONTRAST** – This is when you impose surprise on the reader or listener by stating a complex direction and then going simple. They think you're getting "all technical on them" then you pull the rug out by being as simple as possible.

"I know that I have complex skin...my boyfriend is pretty sure he has a face" – Cathy Ladman

"I just broke up with my girlfriend. We had to, we were just not compatible. You see, I am a Capricorn and she was a... bitch."

- **COMEDIC IRONY** – Let's look at irony. Irony has taken on different meanings over the years. If we were to look at the dictionary's definition of irony, we would find a different definition than the definition most commonly applied in comedy.
- the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect: *"Don't go overboard with the gratitude," he rejoined with heavy irony*
- a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often amusing as a result: [*with clause*]: *the irony is that I thought he could help me*
- (also **dramatic** or **tragic irony**) a literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions are clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character.

Comedy uses the definition that is more suited to "dramatic irony."

Dramatic irony usually associates itself—like in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—whereas a situation occurs that is a surprise that will undo or affect the main character. What makes it ironic is that someone—the audience—or another individual or character entity in the story knows about it.

For example, in "*Romeo and Juliet*," Romeo finds Juliet and believes she is dead. So torn apart is Romeo, that he kills himself. But what he doesn't know is that Juliet took a potion that made her *appear* to be dead and instead, she is in a deep sleep. Juliet awakes to find that Romeo is dead and kills *herself*. How's that for a love story?!

One of the problems with irony in comedy is that it can be a bit of a puzzle for the audience. You need to have an audience that is there for comedy. Irony does not contain "hit-you-over-the-head" surprise like a good reverse. So when you use irony in humor

construction, it'll usually bring about a subtle response, unless it's poignant or profound. As in the audience is amazed at the discovery where they are thinking "Wow, what a coincidence!"

In the classic story of Oedipus Rex, unaware that he was adopted, unknowingly fulfilled a prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother.

"I was poor. In our neighborhood it was common for the men to have one family on one side of town and another family on the other side of town. I didn't meet my sister 'til I was 16...we was on our third date."

Another example of irony is when we can take an authority and reveal a level of hypocrisy or one-hundred-and-eighty-degree incongruity.

Here's an example from another student of mine, David Conolly:

"My father had one of the toughest jobs in the world. He was a priest in a mental hospital... Think about it; his job as a priest was to teach people that there is (pointing to the heavens), someone watching them at all times. And his congregation—patients in the mental hospital were there because they believed that he was a priest in a place where people go who have the illusion that someone is watching them at all times..."

Legendary comedian, George Carlin, used comedic irony all the time. One of his classic opening lines:

"You ever realize that the women who are against abortion are women you wouldn't want to fuck anyway?!"

One of my students Vicki Godal used this line:

"You ever realize that people who don't believe in climate change; they think it's just part of the earth's natural evolution, are the same people who don't believe in evolution?"

- **BENIGN RETALIATION** - This is a formula I've been working on for many years now. Like the planet Pluto was removed as a planet and called a moon, because it lacked certain criteria, 'Benign Retaliation,' had all the elements necessary to be included as a full-blown Joke Formula.

Humans love pay back. We love to get back at somebody who has done us wrong, or led us astray, or gave us bad information or lied to us *without really shooting them stabbing them or otherwise causing them bodily harm*. If we do cause them bodily harm, it is usually done in fantasy using a "what if" scenario. Benign Retaliation is very powerful in comedy because it attacks out of revenge, which is almost the precise reason we do comedy.

Let's take a look at some examples of Benign Retaliation:

One of my students, wrote this one:

I come home from work one night and my wife is frantically cleaning the house. I'm like, "Honey, what's going on? We expecting company? She's like, "Yeah, tomorrow! The housekeeper!" I'm like why are you cleaning? That's what she's for! It's job security!" I love my wife, so I helped her clean...but I got her back. Saturday morning I set the alarm for six A.M. I pop out of bed. She says, "What's going on?" I said, "Get up. We gotta mow the lawn...Gardeners are going to be here in an hour!"

You can see clear retaliation in that joke. Audiences love this type of humor. They relate to it instantly, because it's something they recognize and it's something they can use in their own lives...

I do a bit on tolerance toward gay people and in my bit I use this to attack the perceived authority:

"Focus on the Family founder, James Dobson, said this gem the other day. He said, "If we allow gays to parent, they will raise gay children."

ME: "We interrupt this comedy show, to bring you a special bulletin...straight parents have been raising gay children for centuries.."

Here's one I used about an ex-girlfriend...it's pretty harsh so the reaction from the audience would vary depending on how I delivered it:

I had this girlfriend who used to try to put me down all the time by picking on my weaknesses. She'd be like, "I can't believe you eat veal! I can't believe you don't like wine! I can't believe you don't like Yoga!" Finally, I said, "I can't believe your Dad touched your pussy, but I don't bring that up!"

If you think about it, you can probably find tons of benign retaliation stories in your life that you can use in your comedy.

You ever get into a discussion with your significant other, or someone at the bank, and you think of what you *should have said* after the discussion. That's one way to come up with this type of material.

One time I was with a girl who cheated on me. Halloween rolled around and she said, "I don't know what to be for Halloween." I said, "Why don't you just dress normally and tell people you're pretending to be someone who's in a committed relationship."

Are you starting to see how most good material comes from real life?

- **PARADOX** – **The 13th comedy structure.** I love paradox. The reason why I chose to include paradox as the 13th. Structure is that it encompasses incongruity and irony. By its definition, paradox doesn't quite reach the criteria threshold of the definition of irony, people laugh at it like it is ironic. People also often confuse paradox with irony.

Paradox is defined as "A statement that contradicts itself, yet might be true."
Also at its most basic level, a paradox is a statement that is self-contradictory

because it often contains two statements that are both true, but in general, cannot both be true at the same time.

Let's take a look at some examples:

"We refer to distance in time;

'How far is it to the store?

'About fifteen minutes...'

'It doesn't work the other way around at all:

'What time do you get off work?'

'About five miles.'"

My accountant sucks; he's too honest.

It's the beginning of the end

Instructions for your DVD player: "To set up your new DVD player, play the setup DVD".

"If you're having problems with your phone... call 1-800...

Deep down she's really shallow...

Paradox allows you to think inversely:

Our detergent gets blood stains out of your shirt better than the leading detergent. If you have blood stains in your dress shirts, I think detergent is the least of your problems.

There is so much there with paradox that just reading paradoxical statements can inspire you to write your own. Paradox is much like irony in that it engages both hemispheres of the listener's brain. When this happens, you are beginning to take your comedy to the next level.

Don't Forget the Tags & Toppers

Joke Structure: Setup – Punchline – Tag, Tag, Tag....or act out tag. An act-out is a tag that is physicalized.(Slapstick)

I'm Irish and American Indian. You know what that means...I pretty much have V.I.P. seats waiting for me at any A.A. meeting.

Tag: I show up to one of those meetings, it's like "Hey Running Bear-O'Reilly, we have a chair for you in the front row."

Act Out: I go in, "Hey you got one of them special coins? I gotta get me a beer!"