

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN LAUGHTER



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I think one of the best parts of this book is this section where we actually get inside the brain and figure out what causes laughter. Once you understand this laughter mechanism inside the brain, it gives you tremendous power when it comes to writing and crafting comedy material.

Now you can plan your material as you're writing it to light up certain nerve centers of the brain. When those nerve centers are triggered, the humans in the audience are programmed to laugh. Cool huh?

Part of being the best comedian and comedy writer you can be is learning the fundamentals of human laughter. If you can understand what makes someone laugh it will help you to better shape your material so that it is actually designed to trigger laughs.

The human condition provides for us to be hard wired to laugh. We love it. We love the feeling it gives us, and why not? When we laugh our bodies release endorphins, the same chemical responsible for making us feel a sense of euphoria. In other words laughter makes us "high!"

You've downloaded this e-book because you're in the business of making people laugh either from the stage or the word processor, or you want to be in that business, or you just want to make people laugh; you aim to get laughter with your words and your actions in your everyday lives.

But do you really know what makes people laugh? Most people, (even professional comedians and writers), don't.

If you go to a comedy club and ask a comedian, "what makes people laugh?" and they'll usually reply with "a punch line." But where does that leave us? It leaves us with nothing we can use to be better at our craft, because "a punch line" is vague and gives us nothing to work with, or build from.

Humor and the human condition hasn't been really studied until recently. Psychologists still argue over why people laugh.

I can probably write a whole book on the arguments behind the theories of these psychologists, starting with the Benign Violation Theory and moving into Freud believing that we laugh because we cover our repressed sexual feelings--which, really?! If I was repressed sexually, I wouldn't be laughing, I'd be crying!

LAUGH TRIGGERS

There are many human laugh triggers, tickling being one of them, but for the purposes of this e-course, I am going to focus on the human laughter triggers that relate to comedy. So we will be focusing on comedy, both written and spoken and how you can use specific elements to trigger the human laugh mechanism.

The number one element that triggers human laughter is SURPRISE.

Once you understand this concept, you are now miles ahead of the huge majority of people out there and ahead—believe it or not—of most comedians.

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

That's right. Most comedians don't know what triggers human laughter. That seems really strange to me. Wouldn't you want to know what makes people laugh if you're in the business of doing just that?

If you go to a comedy club right now and ask the majority of comedians what triggers human laughter and they will probably answer you by saying, "a punch line," or "timing."

That's nice but what does that mean? It doesn't mean anything if you don't know what it is...

My wife is an airline pilot. I could not fathom her being able to control an airplane with any skill, confidence and certainty without knowing the science of aerodynamics. But there you have it.

Most comedians don't know what triggers human laughter.

But now that you know about surprise, you will have a command that so many people in the business lack. Most comics lived by the old adage, "If it gets a laugh, leave it in..." without really knowing *why* it got a laugh.



Jerry Seinfeld, literally one of the most successful comedians ever, still goes out thinking and hoping something is funny rather than knowing *why* it is funny. He will step on stage and try out so much material hoping it will get a laugh and wind up scratching out a large portion of what he initially tries. Wow 60% !!!

Jerry Seinfeld is one of my all-time favorite comedians, so I'm not criticizing, but I would rather write comedy that I knew contained all the elements to trigger laughter, than just working on instinct and hope.

There is still a degree of hope involved as you will find out, but eventually you will know with a high degree of accuracy that a joke is funny.

George Carlin said he knew with ninety-eight percent accuracy that a joke would be funny before he stepped on stage.

There's an old saying in comedy that 'we're only guessing and audience is the judge.' However, by understanding what triggers human laughter and learning all the comedy structures your "guesses" will be a lot more accurate.

THEORIES OF LAUGHTER

According to Psychologist Patricia Keith-Speigel, there are eight theories of laughter...

I've included her theories in the left column. In the right column I have developed my own set of theories based on nearly 30 years of testing them on live audiences night after night. They are similar with a couple of differences that are more applicable to comedy.

So let's compare the laughter triggers according to psychology and according to live audience testing.

Patricia Keith-Speigel	Corley
Surprise	Surprise
Biological	Embarrassment
Incongruity	Recognition
Recognition	Incongruity
Ambivalence	Superiority
Release	Release
Superiority	Ambivalence
Configurational	Configurational
	Coincidence

SURPRISE

Surprise is the most powerful reason people laugh. In fact I can argue that surprise dominates the reasoning so much, that the others; embarrassment, incongruity and recognition are a means with which we create surprise.

When we use surprise effectively, it gets triggered, spontaneous laughter.

The key is *misdirection*.

We must first misdirect the audience to have them assume we are going to say one thing then we quickly pop that balloon of expectation and “POW” we have a punch line!

“I was at the mall the other day and I ran into my ex-girlfriend in the parking lot... totally screwed up the front end of my car!”

“I remember, one time, I went over to her house to beg her to take me back. It was like 2 o'clock in the morning, I was drunk and I'm banging on the door... “Stacy! Stacy!” Which is weird, because her name is Emily...”

“I'm losing my hair. Sometimes it really bugs me...like this morning, my wife was running her fingers through my hair—but I already left for work...”

EMBARRASSMENT



We often laugh at ourselves to cover our embarrassment in a given situation. It releases us of the responsibility of maintaining our perception of how we want people to view us.

If we laugh at the fact that we forgot to zip up our flies or that we tore our pants up the seam in the rear, it helps us maintain our composure and demonstrates

that we are still "in control" of our image.

Other people laugh at *our* embarrassing situation out of *recognition* because they have either done the exact same thing or could imagine being in that same situation and they are empathizing with us by sharing the feeling AND they are also laughing out of a release of tension for the fact that they are *relieved* that it is NOT them who is the subject of the "embarrassing" situation.

I know that's a mouthful, but re-read that again, because it's a valuable piece of information in understanding the human response. If you master this, you can take an audience in any direction you want.

Think of all of the things that cause anxiety and embarrassment and I can assure you that a large portion of comedy material is already out there on it or is being written on it as we speak.

What causes embarrassment?

- Personal foibles that can affect our dignity or "coolness."
- Sexual situations
- Private concerns
- Failures

PERSONAL FOIBLES

That's one of the beauties of comedy. You can make a mistake and use the mistake to get a laugh. Empowerment from our weaker selves! Audiences view a comedian who is willing to make fun of themselves and their mistakes as courageous!

One of the best things to write comedy about is your weaknesses.

- Are you clumsy?
- Do you struggle with the opposite sex?
- Are you weak?
- Do you often make mistakes?
- Are you broke?
- Do you procrastinate?
- Are you a slob?
- Are you always late?
- Are you overweight?
- Are you skinny?
- Are you an addict?
- Did you get bad grades in school?

SEXUAL SITUATIONS

More than 50 percent of all humor out there is related directly or indirectly to sex. Why? Because some of our biggest anxieties are related to sex;

"Am I big enough?" "Does she think I'm sexy?" "Do I look fat in this?" "Do I please her/him?"

"My girlfriend and I were making love and she said, "You're the perfect size. My ex-boyfriend was so big, he hurt me..." I couldn't get it up for three weeks."

Talking openly about the subject of sex and our shortcomings (pardon the pun), creates embarrassment and to hide our embarrassment we laugh.

Also, if it's something the audience relates to, they recognize it...is recognition on the list of reasons we laugh...well, yes it is!

Here's where I want you to be careful and use your intelligence and your desire to develop quality humor. Many beginning comedians have a tendency to go right to the gutter when they start writing comedy. They do a lot of jokes about farting, peeing and other embarrassing bathroom humor, and although I know there's a place for that, I want you to work hard to find more creative ways to write comedy without going right to the poop jokes.

"I just got a new video poker app for my Droid. I love to play it when I'm in the bathroom. On one hand my wife is happy I've found a new way to play with myself, on the other hand, she's getting tired of hearing me yell from the bathroom, 'STRAIGHT FLUSH!'"

When I first wrote that joke, there was no mention of my wife. It was just me yelling 'straight flush,' but embedding the human interaction—*her frustration with me*—disguises the fact that we're talking about going to the bathroom. Does that make sense?

Therefore, finessing the joke just a little bit and making it about her frustrations takes the edge off the joke, but still leaves room for embarrassment and incongruity...

Speaking of incongruity, let's move to the next powerful element that triggers human laughter...

INCONGRUITY

Incongruity is the most common joke structure used in comedy today. It's been popular since the beginning of comedy. What is incongruity? Incongruity is basically imposing characteristics of one thing on to another thing that normally doesn't have those characteristics.

A simple way to do this might be to personify an animal, like when Jerry Seinfeld says,

"I don't think horses really know they're racing. I think horses are sitting at the starting gate thinking, "I know there's a bag of oats at the end of this and I want to get there first."



We don't normally imagine a horse thinking like a human being. So when Jerry makes us imagine that, it's the **INCONGRUITY** of it that makes us laugh. Why? **Because incongruity creates surprise.**

In the earlier joke about the video poker app and the bathroom, you have two elements we normally don't put together ("Poker" and "the Bathroom") and in the joke I impose the characteristics of the bathroom onto the subject matter of poker, creating incongruity which leads to surprise, which triggers laughter.

Are you starting to see how this works?

There are so many different ways that you can use incongruity. Remember the television show "The Odd Couple?" We had two men sharing an apartment.

One was a slob, the other was a neat freak. The differences between them or their "incongruities" was where the comedy came from.

Let's look at this from a more singular perspective:

The very talented actress, Annie Potts, was being interviewed recently about her upcoming sitcom called "GCB."



She talked about a scene where her character, a very petite upscale Southern Christian woman, shoots a shotgun several times.

She says in the interview, "There's something intrinsically funny about a petite woman shooting a shotgun."

The fact is: there's **incongruity** present and *that's* what makes it funny.



EXERCISE

Here's a quick exercise in incongruity:

As a **quick exercise** think of three celebrities with defined characteristics and write them down. Then put them in a situation in which you would normally not see them and act them out.

- Imagine Comedian Chris Rock as a line judge for Wimbledon. How would he call the ball out?
- Arnold Schwarzenegger in a gay porn.
- Betty White as a foul-mouthed trucker.

You could do this all day. One of the easiest ways to get a laugh is to have a female senior citizen, talk about sex. I have a student in my class (the lovely Esther Hersh), in her seventies... (of course she'll never admit to it). But during her act she says:

"So now I'm dating, and dating is hard, mainly because my men aren't."

The simple juxtaposition of putting this senior citizen woman in a sexual situation creates incongruity—that, along with the double entendre use of the word 'hard,' creates surprise, which triggers laughter!

More on this later...

RECOGNITION

So far in this e-book, I've given you 3 very powerful comedy structures to trigger human laughter. Now I'm going to give you one of the key formulas that is used by the richest, arguably one of the most successful comedians, not just of our time but--financially speaking--in history; Jerry Seinfeld.

Seinfeld's calling card is observational humor. He is gifted at pointing at the visual nuances in our lives that we recognize and the moment we connect to that recognition, we laugh. It's the simple **recognition** that triggers the laughter.

Recognition is really huge in this business because it actually will trigger a physical reaction from the audience. When they recognize something they will jerk in their seats, point at the stage and say things like, "I've done *that!*"

When you get the audience that committed to your act, you are in the driver's seat.

So how do you do this?

Remember when we talked about the 3 types of comedians; "**Coincidental, Architects and Humorists,**" at the top of the page?

Well this particular laughter trigger element is probably mostly based in the first category, because if you think about it you have to observe something in order to recognize it. But just by me mentioning it in this e-book will help you be more aware of the nuances of observation so that you can then be ready and prepared to write them down.

If your act has top notch, clear and poignant observations, the audience's recognition will be that much more graphic and acute. This usually leads to stronger laughs and bigger applause.



Quick Note: Be sure you carry a notebook and something to write with at all times. I still carry a notebook in my back pocket every single day. If you don't have a notebook, then a digital recorder or the recorder on your phone also is a great way to capture your notes.

Important: When you write something down, be sure to write the details of the event, not just a key word! From experience I can tell you, you probably won't remember the finer details. It is in the details, where the recognition is developed.

THERE ARE 5 PRIMARY RECOGNITION STRATEGIES:

1. **Physical Observations:** Observing behaviors of living creatures, inanimate objects, why is it that you get artificial lemon flavor in food, but real lemon juice in dishwashing liquid? You ever notice that 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.
2. **Verbal Observations:** When see written words either on signs or billboards, or other advertisements or when a person says something that we've heard before but never thought about writing it down. (**NOTE:** look for things that are quirky, ironic, or make no sense):

Has your girlfriend ever said to you: *"I'm going to ask you something and you have to promise you won't get mad?"* That's when you know you're in for a long night!

I saw a sign that said: *"Authentic Chinese Cuisine - Se habla espanol."*

I saw another sign that said: *No Dogs Allowed. Except seeing-eye dogs. Who's that sign for?"*

I was watching this commercial for laundry detergent it said,

"Our detergent does a better job getting blood out of your shirt than the leading detergent.' If you've got blood on your shirt, choosing the right detergent is the least of your problems."

- 3. Personal Observations:** These are observations that occur in your more intimate world; home with relatives. They are observations that are unique to your life.

My wife came home from the store the other day with all these expensive new clothes. She starts out the conversation by saying. "Honey, you have no idea how much money I saved us!"

"When you're married, did you ever notice that her money is "her" money, but your money is "our" money?"

- 4. Esoteric Observations:** General observations culled from small seemingly insignificant life events. Like the feeling you have when you lean back in a chair and it almost falls backwards, but you catch yourself, when you tighten the cap on a soda bottle and you pinch your finger, or...

When you're broke, online banking is just anxiety reinforcement. Every time you go online to check your balance there's that tension

that builds up dreading what balance is going to be displayed on the website.

You ever notice that women who are against abortion, are women you wouldn't want to fuck anyway? - George Carlin

5. **Human Behavior:** Usually related to physical behavior of humans or animals. Football Players doing the celebration dance after a tackle. Guys will do push-ups before going out on a date.

You ever ask someone how they are doing and they respond by starting with a big, whiney sigh? You know it's going to be a long conversation...

The important thing to remember is that if you simply remember to write down your observation, then you can recall it later to the audience. The more specific you get, the more detail your description has, the more crystal clear the imagery is to the audience.

How come we press harder on the remote control when you know the battery is dead?

And the quicker an audience gets a clear image in their minds, the more instantaneous the laugh.

I cannot emphasize how important it is to get the specifics of the observation, especially when you're dealing with verbal nuances. If you say the phrase exactly right, it's the recognition that gets the laughs.

"You ever notice when you're in your car you'll lean forward toward the stereo unit to hear better, which is weird because the speakers are on the sides..."

Take for example the line above about the blood stain in your shirt. When the announcer says "our detergent gets out blood stains better than the leading

brand." Saying the words "leading brand" is exactly how an announcer would say such a thing. Specifics are crucial.

OTHER WAYS TO TRIGGER RECOGNITION LAUGHTER:

- Impressions
- Song Parodies
- Musical emulation
- Sound effects

You ever notice that if an impression is not good or a song is sung out of tune that the performance not only risks NOT being funny, but could totally destroy the credibility of the performer?

But if the impression resembles the character and the song is in key, it could take that act to a completely different level!

Impressions rock the house when done right because the audience **recognizes** the character and they are surprised that the comedian can do the voice so well.

Here's the great thing about doing voices: You don't necessarily have to do celebrity voices to get laughs. You could do your mother, father, cousin, clerk at the store, a gay person with a lisp...whatever. If you totally nail that voice's nuances, (an accent, lisp, whiney sound, etc.), the audience will reward you with laughter and on occasion, applause. And those are nice occasions to have!

So if you do a good voice think about building it into your act. But make sure you practice so you can NAIL the voice.

And don't forget:

The key to successful recognition is *specificity*.



Now that we understand the seven major reasons humans laugh, let's move on to how to develop and trigger these elements of laughter by utilizing the Twelve Major Comedy Structures when writing and performing our comedy.

A QUICK WORD REGARDING PROP COMEDY, IMPRESSIONS, SONG PARODIES OR WORKING WITH AN INSTRUMENT.



There are a lot of comedians out there who frown fiercely on prop comedians, guitar comedians, impressionists or comedians who do song parodies. My thoughts on the matter are very simple: if you feel that doing prop comedy, impressions, song parodies or working with a musical instrument is being true to you, then by all means do it!

I honestly don't understand why any comedian would spend valuable time criticizing or putting down any other comic, regardless of if they use a prop in their act or musical instrument.

Scott Thompson, (a.k.a.: "Carrot Top," is a prop comic. A lot of comedians criticize him. And yet, Carrot Top is one of the highest-paid entertainers in the country today.

Instead of criticizing somebody like this, wouldn't it be more beneficial to learn from their successes; their tenacity, their business acumen, etc., than spend negative energy criticizing them simply for being a prop comic?

A WORD ON TIMING



If you were to ask comedians what triggers human laughter they might say something like, “timing is the most important thing in comedy.” Sure that sounds good, but what does that mean? How do you break down timing into an understandable process?

Other comedians say that you either have it or you don't. I don't believe in that. I've worked with comedy students of all kinds. I even work with a student who has brain damage. When we first started I thought to myself, “Wow! There is no way this is going to work. But we worked on it and worked on it, and you know what? He's developing his timing!

This taught me something very important:



Timing is a skill that can be taught!

Timing is not as complicated as one might think. Timing is more a listening technique than anything else. Let me explain:

Comedy is about misdirection. It's about letting the audience assume you are going to say something... then at the last possible moment you say something else, thus shattering the image that you lead them to believe you intended. The timing comes in when you give them a moment to see that image in their mind's eye before you shatter it.

"I've been losing my hair. Sometimes it really bothers me, like in the mornings when my wife is running her fingers through my hair...but I already left for work."

When I say "in the mornings when my wife is running her fingers through my hair..." I have to take a moment and allow the listener to get the image of me lying next to my wife in bed while she is running her fingers through my hair. Once they get that image (and it only takes a second), that's when I shatter that image by saying, "but I already left for work!"

A simple trick you can do to help you develop that timing. When you do a set up like the one above, take a moment and sniff before you say the punch. This will help in learning how long you should wait to say the punch line. Use this in practice until you get comfortable with your own pacing. That small 'incidental' pause may help your timing.

Another important point when it comes to timing is sincerity. You must be engaged with real empathy toward your material. You should be honest in your expressions and really be emotionally connected to your material.

Think about this. Human beings are emotional beings. If you are honest about everything you are saying—even when you exaggerate the truth in your punch line, you are not only talking to your audience, you are also "emoting." And if you are doing it honestly two things occur:

1. You're audience connects with you emotionally.
2. Your honesty in your reactions and emotions will keep the 'timing' honest too.

Here's another exercise in timing:

Whenever you leave a message on someone's voice mail and you leave your phone number, be sure you say the number as you imagine the other person writing it down. If you do this, you will notice that you will actually slow your delivery of the number down automatically.

Not only with this little tid-bit help you to be more aware of your timing, it will help you develop more solid relationships, because when the person on the other end of the phone is writing that number down and they don't have to rewind to hear the number... they will THANK YOU!

But enough about that. Let's continue with the laughter triggers...



AMBIVALENCE

Ambivalence is a form of incongruity in that when we are ambivalent about something, we are not caring about it. Usually we use ambivalence in a comedy situation when we are expected to care about something but don't. It is the nature of not caring that is incongruent, and that surprises the audience and causes them to laugh. Let's look at a couple of examples of jokes that may utilize ambivalence:

I remember the good ole days when kids worked in factories.

I was trying to teach my five-year-old how to tie her shoes. She was like, "Dad! I can't Dad, I can't! I said, "How many times I told you not to use that word... I am not your Dad."

When my mother got older she started having memory problems which was a boon for me on my birthdays. She would give me a birthday card with \$100 bill in it. Then she'd say, "Jerry, did I give

you your birthday card?" I look at her and say, "Uhhmm...No!" if she was having a really bad day, I could net about a grand!"

As you can see, it is the ambivalence, the "not caring" that triggers the laughter. You have to be careful with this however, because if you pick on the wrong thing or the wrong person, you could elicit groans rather than laughs.

RELEASE

Release, is a more complicated laughter trigger. He ever see those movies where there's a group of business people in the conference room and one of the employees makes a joke, and is a long pause as everybody looks at the boss, finally the boss laughs and then everybody else laughs too... This is a perfect example of release.

There was tension built up from the anxiety created from what the boss might think about what was said. Then, everybody laughed because the boss laughed releasing the tension.

We also experience release when we discuss life's tragedies on stage in a way that plans to get to a laugh at the end of something very serious. In my act, I talk about my mother dying and how it sent me into a temporary tailspin:

... And when you go to any of these funeral events is always that one guy who ask you "the question." You know the one I'm talking about? That guy will come up to you and say, "What you want them to say about you at your funeral?" And the guy came up to me, the son and he said, "What do you want them to say about you at your funeral Jerry?" and I looked at him with tears in my eyes and I said, "What what do I want them to say about me at my funeral? I want them to say... 'Hey look! He's moving!'"

This story is told from a very personal point of view. The audience is rapt with emotion, so when I finally get to the last line, they are so relieved that the line is funny, that they actually burst with laughter. This line, by the way, is almost always followed by applause.



The joke or comedy bit that is structured to trigger release has to be crafted very carefully but it can also elicit a pure emotional response from the audience; the kind of emotional response that sets you, the comedian, apart from everybody else.

Sometimes release can be triggered because the comedian is discussing a very sensitive topic.

I remember I wrote a Pope joke the day the Pope John Paul II died. I saw it in the New York Times; I had just had to! The audience, of course, was very sensitive about this so I had to craft the joke just right:

"You may have heard that the Pope died today. (Audience immediately builds tension) Now it doesn't matter whether you're Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, you cannot deny the commitment John Paul had to his faith. He was an amazing man. But he died and the article in the New York Times was saying that tens of thousands of people were praying for the Pope...what are they praying for? That he'll go to Heaven? Because if the Pope needs that kind of assistance to get to Heaven, the rest of us are screwed!" (Laughter and applause)

You can probably see that the laughter and applause triggered from this joke comes both from the structure of the joke; the idea that the Pope, one the most holy men in the world, would actually need help from the common man, to get into Heaven, and the release of the audience's tension caused from their concern about what I was going to say about the recently deceased Pope.

Release, as a laughter trigger can be very powerful because it is attached to the audience's emotions and if the joke is executed effectively the payoff received from the audience can be profound and powerful!

Some ideas and subjects that may create tension and provide the opportunity to trigger the release mechanism are:

- Death
- Abortion
- Kids
- Religion
- Rape
- Politics
- Gun rights
- Racism
- Sexual Preference (Gay rights)
- Tragedies (9-11, Nuclear Disaster, Holocaust, etc.)
- The Bible
- The Quran

Jokes that trigger the release mechanism aren't attacks, necessarily. They are jokes designed to appear as attacks and the mere surprise created by fact that they don't attack is what triggers the release. It's a complex joke writing technique, but worth the effort because it provides a profound audience response and gets them thinking.

“Don't just make them laugh, make them think...” –George Carlin

SUPERIORITY

One of the most universal laughter triggers in our human psyche. Thankfully, (well, certainly for the sake of comedy), we are a very insecure species. We are always worried about how we are being perceived. Our self-image is so important to us that we constantly need assurance that we are not just okay, but there are other people out there worse off than us!

Don't think you fit into this? Ask yourself this question: when I am introduced to someone, do I have problems remembering their name, even right after the introduction?

If that happens to you—and, don't worry, it happens to everyone, then you suffer from a common ailment know as "being human." There is a reason that we run into this problem. Some people are good at remembering those names, but it usually takes practice and self-awareness. The reason we forget the name so quickly is because our brains are usually sub-consciously so preoccupied with how the person we are being introduced to is perceiving us, that we aren't in the state of mind to register and record their name in our brain.

So we all suffer from a level of insecurity. Why is this a good thing? Because we can use it in comedy to create laughter. Since we know this exists we can exploit, turn it on its head and use it as a tool! A very cool tool.

Superiority is used in many ways:

- Self-deprecating humor
- Insult humor
- Attacking the status-quo
- Picking on authority
- Putting down a heckler
- Attacking an ex who did us wrong
- Making fun of the a know-it-all
- Making fun of a celebrity who deserves it

One of the easiest ways to use superiority—and one of my favorites—is to self-deprecate, (make fun of myself). Anytime I say something that makes me superior in the joke or story I'm telling, I say something to bring myself down or knock myself down a peg. That makes the audience feel superior and it also lets them know that I don't take myself too seriously.

A cop pulled me over and said, "You know how fast you were going?" I said, "You think at that speed, I'm gonna risk taking my eyes off the road to check the speedometer?" He said, "Oh, you

wanna play around?" I said, "Does that mean I have to dress like a sheep...?"

...so, when I regained consciousness..."

Saying, "...so, when I regained consciousness..." implies that the cop used his billy club to knock me out and with what I said, I probably deserved it. That action humbled me, but makes the audience feel superior!

CONFIGURATIONAL

For quite some time experts didn't think that the configurational theory of laughter was applicable to commercially accepted comedy, but I'm here to tell you that it is alive and well. If Jon Stewart's "Daily Show" is considered commercially acceptable, then it more than acceptable, it is a hit.

Configurational theorists argue that the humor occurs when unconnected ideas fall into place and in that moment, make sense. It's what I would call an "Ah-ha!" moment. It is the solving of the puzzle that gets an audience to laugh. Jon Stewart is a master at this style of material. I requires work to carefully lay out the pieces so that they come together.

I used it with a joke I did about the car from Yugoslavia called the Yugo...

"You know why they call it the "Yugo?" Because when you get to a hill, it cuts out; you shut it off, you get out and YOU go up the hill."

"My wife's name is Jeri and my name is Jerry. We're pretty much a mathematical relationship in bed; we're reciprocal fractions... Jeri over Jerry, or Jerry over Jeri; either way the results are the same."



Steven Wright uses a configurational approach to trigger laughter:

I saw a sign that said "Rest Area One Mile..." I thought, "Wow that's huge!"

With that joke above, what he means is that he perceives the sign to mean the rest area is one full mile. That would, indeed be huge for a rest area.

Mitch Hedberg was another comedian who absolutely loved utilizing configurational laugh triggers:

A waffle is like a pancake with a syrup trap

Every book is a children's book, if the kid can read.

I would imagine that if you could understand Morse code, a tap dancer would drive you crazy.

I could read Mitch Hedberg all day. He makes me laugh and he had a huge following all by making people put the pieces together to solve his laughter puzzles... and to think that some comedy gurus don't think that configuration is useful in contemporary comedy today!

*Have you heard of the new dating website called sex-istentialist dot com? When you meet someone you like, you don't go out; you just jump to the part where you stop returning each other's emails. –
Joe Dungan*

COINCIDENCE

The ninth laughter trigger is something I added. Recently, after studying comedians and evaluating the laugh points, I just had to add coincidence, because we tend to laugh at it almost just because it's there.

It's the reason we laugh at irony and paradox. It's also the reason we laugh at analogy and paired phrases, if they are presented correctly.

The dictionary defines coincidence as *a remarkable concurrence of events or circumstances which have no apparent causal connection with each other.*

"Sex with my ex reminds me of working out on the weight bench at the gym; I always have to wipe it down first and I know a LOT of men were there before me!"

Actually when two things come together that didn't have a relationship in the first place we're surprised, but when a writer or performer present it and they just "happen" to come together, we laugh because we're surprised and impressed.

There is a level of profundity present when coincidence is involved. It makes the listener's mind 'dance' a little, making the material that much more entertaining.

Effectively, coincidence embraces surprise, incongruity and a little configuration.

"Sex with my ex... you know what that reminds me of? Working out on the weight bench at the gym; I always have to wipe it down first and I know a LOT of men were there before me!"

SUMMARY

That covers the 9 major laughter triggers. Who would've thought that a look into your brain could be so painless?

You should be feeling like you're beginning to have a more complete understanding of how comedy—when properly constructed—can achieve the goal of getting people to spontaneously laugh. But understanding the way the brain works with laughter triggers is just the beginning.

Now that we understand the 9 major reasons humans laugh, let's move on to how to develop and trigger these elements of laughter by utilizing the 13 Major Comedy Structures when writing and performing our comedy.