

# Making Your Speech Funny

Unless you're already a witty speaker who just has that knack for making people laugh, when you are asked to write a humorous speech, you are probably faced with that feeling of being overwhelmed, am I right?

You might find yourself staring at your computer screen or your notebook with the feeling that there's an amorphous glob of doubt hovering over you making you feel lost or confused as the glob keeps whispering, "*Be funny!*"



Don't feel bad. Most people feel this way. Comedy is one of the most misunderstood and underexamined art forms in modern times. The first formal humor courses didn't get started until the 80's and despite that, most teachers still don't really fundamentally understand the *how's* and *why's* of comedy.

If you've read my book, [Breaking Comedy's DNA](#), you probably already look at comedy from a totally different position. It's no longer overwhelming and confusing. It's no longer 'magic.' Though ironically it does have a lot of similarities to magic.

In this segment, I am going to demonstrate one of the most effective ways to write a humorous, laugh-triggering speech using an actual speech I



wrote for a distinguished news broadcaster who doesn't have a reputation for being funny.

I will introduce tools that you can use today, to take your speech and “drop in” some appropriate laughs while *still communicating your ideas effectively*.

I've included an [audio version of this article](#). I would recommend listening to it so that you can fully grasp the intention of the humor. Humor written for speeches is meant to be heard, not read.

First off, if you're a speaker, presenter, teacher, minister, best man, or just someone who has to deliver a speech to colleagues or friends you've probably had the occasion where wanted to add some humor to your words.

If you're in a position where you have to deliver a serious speech, then you might be worried that the humor will take away from the importance of the material.

There is a time to be serious and a time when you can use humor. If you're the president of a company and your speech is about the need to lay-off 300 workers, then humor probably wouldn't be appropriate.

Yet, at the same time I'd argue that sometimes humor at the beginning of the speech about how awkward it is to have to make announcements like this can work wonders in humanizing you.

But in a vast majority of situations, humor is not only appropriate but almost essential.

One of the biggest mistakes people make when writing comedy is that they try to write something funny. And though that sounds strange, that's usually deadly. If you get up on stage and say "So here's a funny story..." You've already set the bar high and you've triggered the audience to feel inferior and whether they are physically showing it or not, they are saying, "Well then, it better be funny."

The essence of comedy is obstacles. The simplest analogy is that it's about someone who's trying to get from point A to point B and encountering obstacles. The obstacles don't have to be physical. They can be intellectual or emotional.

The object to being funny in a speech or in stand-up is not to try to be funny. It's to be earnest in your effort to achieve your goal or intention. On the way to that attempt, take some moments to create surprise based on the information you are presenting. This might sound confusing but you'll understand as we start to get under the hood below.

When I read about people trying to give advice on how to add humor to a speech, they often say something like, *just include a humorous anecdote in your speech*, or *plug in a joke in a couple of places*, or I've even heard, *just smile a lot and laugh once in awhile. If you laugh, the world laughs with you!*

And although there is some truth to that concept here's a little piece of advice: if you're talking about the plight of the underprivileged or the struggle of the slaves that mine blood diamonds in Africa, smiling and laughing, just for the sake of smiling and laughing is probably not going to be widely accepted by your audience.

However, I do think you can use humor in just about everything. Just before a serious speech, sometimes the president makes a quip with someone off

to the side or a member of the press. President Reagan did this effectively, so did Clinton and one of the best at this is President Obama. He's really demonstrated an ability to deliver a joke very effectively.

Humor, even during serious times serves to humanize the speaker.

On the surface this might not sound logical. To grasp this, we must take a moment to understand how humans respond to the emotions of anger, resentment, sadness, doom as it relates to joy, appreciation love, elation and the feeling of belonging.

We humans, when we are *not directly involved with the emotion*, have the ability to shift our our emotions from one extreme to the other, almost instantly.

If you're watching a television show and the writers have developed a character that is designed to make you despise them, the moment that character sacrifices themselves for the greater good or for the protagonist, we, as viewers, shift our emotion.

In the television show "The Walking Dead," there was a character named 'Merle.' He was a Southern redneck, expertly played by Michael Rooker. He was a bad seed and a trouble maker. We despised Merle. We wanted Merle to die! And we were supposed to. The writers wrote him that way. But the moment Merle sacrificed himself for the greater good of the group we were rooting for, Merle changed. And we found ourselves saying, "Poor Merle!"

How can we change our emotion so quickly from anger to sympathy? One theory could be that the feelings of happiness and love share the same neural pathways as anger, hurt and jealousy.



So when you use humor appropriately in a serious speech and get a laugh, you can pivot back into seriousness instantly, just changing your tone of voice and your demeanor. The audience will follow you.

There's a theory in theater science: *The audience is in whatever state the performer is in.* And we're not talking geography!

I also cannot emphasize enough, the power of using authentic emotion while speaking before a group. Humans are emotional beings and we connect with one another through emotion. Even in the event where the listener doesn't agree with our ideology, the listener will respond to the emotion and still have a connection with the speaker.

Humor has an amazing ability to disarm people and help them connect with the speaker. When someone laughs, for that moment, they are giving themselves over to you in one way or another. In that moment they accept you.

So as George Carlin used to say, "While their mouths are open for laughter, you can stuff some food in for thought."

Here are just a few reasons why you need humor in a speech or presentation:

- 1. Likeability:** There's an old saying: "It's impossible to dislike someone who makes you laugh." There's science behind this. When we laugh, the brain release hormones endorphins, serotonin, oxytocin. The the body's "feel-good" drugs. These are the same chemicals the brain releases when we fall in love. They're also the same chemicals released if you shoot heroin--but that's another story!

Being able to have that likeability during a speech gives you

something the next speaker just won't command; respectful attention and admiration. Also, if there are two speakers with similar content and presentability and one of the speakers is humorous, the majority of listeners will line up to talk to the humorous speaker in much higher numbers than the one who avoided humor. Simply speaking: Humor sells!

2. **Retention:** Studies from the University of Arkansas and San Diego State say that any subject purposely taught with humor injected into the curriculum increased student retention of the information and students who learned in the humorous environment consistently had higher test scores than the students in the environment where humor was purposely avoided.
3. **Status:** When you use humor effectively in a speech it automatically demonstrates an additional skill set. In addition you have also instantly tapped into one of the core ingredients necessary to achieve memorability; being unconventional.

Now that you understand a little more of the *how's* and *why's* of using humor in your speeches. Let's take a look at the mechanics of how a common speech can be changed to add humor without taking away from the presenters intentions or their individual personality.

Just as a reminder, I've included audio in this packet so you can listen along. This form of comedy is written to be heard and is not always translated effectively in written words on the page. Hearing the material as how it's supposed to be delivered is nearly essential for it to be successful!

Recently I was hired by David Sheehan, a television broadcast legend in Los Angeles. He was one of the speakers at a tribute for Rick Dees, the long time D.J. of America's Weekly Top 40 radio program and a local Los

Angeles D.J. in a career that has spanned decades. He was also known for the song parody “Disco Duck.” He was also my favorite radio D.J. throughout my teens and into my twenties.

Mr. Sheehan wanted a speech that had some laughs in it. Below you’ll find the first part of the speech written by him and then my revisions of that intro segment.

When doing a speech or delivering information in a presentation, the content is more important than the jokes.

Understanding the joke structures and the laughter triggers can help you to take that information and use a systematic procedure to ‘drop-in’ some laughs and turn a simple informative or instructional speech into a more humorous, more entertaining and enjoyable speech. When you’re familiar with the science and structure of comedy it almost becomes a step-by-step process.

Here’s the process:

1. Write the Speech. Don’t worry about being funny. That’s the killer. The biggest laughter trigger in comedy is surprise. If they see you trying to be funny there is no surprise. Just include all the information you want convey in your speech. When you’re done with the speech ask each sentence a few questions.

But before you do that it is important to familiarize yourself with the fundamental core elements of comedy (you can get those by reading my packet on the *9 Psychological Laughter Triggers* and *13 Major Comedy Structures*) including the science of laughter and the structures of comedy.

Here are the questions you ask each sentence you have written:

1. Is there something assumed here that I can shatter? (Is there an assumption of imagery, a gender, honesty, seriousness?)
  2. Is there a double entendre play? Is there a word with an implied meaning that I can change to a comedic or cynical meaning?
  3. Are there 2 dissimilar ideas converging that I can turn into a joke by using incongruity?
  4. Is there a 'simple truth' play? (A phrase, euphemism or metaphor that I can change into the comedian's simple, linear truth?)
2. Once you add those laugh points, read it through and see if it flows.
  3. Ask yourself is there too much laughter? In a five minute speech, you really only need 5-10 laughs. In most cases a laugh a minute is great. If there is too much laughter, the audience won't know what to take seriously and the impact of the information you are seriously trying to convey could get lost.
  4. Read it in front of a friend, get some honest feedback. Revise and memorize.
  5. Perform it and stay earnest in conveying your information. Smile sardonically, do a take, or a slow burn only if necessary to indicate to the audience that a joke is just a joke.

### **Things to Consider**

- Before you move forward consider the audience that you or the person you are writing for. How old are they what type of function is this? You don't want to do a Comedy Central Roast at dinner of distinguished ladies and gentlemen of the 1-percent.

- Speeches are NOT stand-up. You are there to deliver information or convey an idea or sentiment. So deliver the material with the earnestness of getting the information across.

That being said, let's take a look at the first part of the speech and then the revisions.

### **ORIGINAL (by David Sheehan)**

“First of all, I have to apologize for these notes - but I wanted to do justice to the man we're honoring today - and I'm not used to talking to large and distinguished crowds of people, such as yourselves, without a teleprompter - thus: the notes.

The first time I heard him on my car radio saying to his vast audience “Hurt me Baby - make me write bad checks”, I was a fan forever. I'm not even sure why - probably the slightly warped sense of humor that connected with my own warped-ness.”

This is the actual material Mr. Sheehan sent to me to work with. I wanted to give it some laughs without taking away his voice. It's always nice, before you start making fun of anyone, to first say hello... then take a quick opportunity to make fun of yourself. So the audience knows that you (or the speaker) don't think you are better than them. (It's using the superiority laughter trigger. Always make the audience feel superior).

Also remember, if you're writing for someone else, you want to be sure that their original voice they had in their original speech still comes through. In other words don't completely shred their original work. :-)

So what I did below is to simply read each line (sentence) in the original speech and ask the questions. What I came up with for the first draft shows

up below. Be advised, the mechanics of comedy are essential if the words are changed or moved it can often eliminate the surprise or the coincidence. If that happens the laughs just won't occur.

## **REVISION #1 (by Jerry Corley)**

Thank you very much. Good Evening.

I really want to do justice to the man we're honoring today - so I brought some notes - Let's face it, at my age I'll need them just to remember WHO we're honoring today. **(Structures: Simple Truth. Laughter Triggers: Release, Surprise, Embarrassment, Superiority)**

Of course I'm kidding. We are here for the legendary Rick Dees. But I still must apologize for the notes. Because like our president, I'm not used to working without a teleprompter. **(Structures: Incongruity, Recognition Laughter Triggers: Incongruity, coincidence).**

I'm also not used to speaking in front of such distinguished individuals--so thankfully, it's just *you people*. **(Structures: Reverse, Simple Truth. Laughter Triggers: surprise, ambivalence)**

I can remember the day when I became a fan of Rick Dees forever. It was the very first time I heard him on my car radio saying to his vast audience "Hurt me, Baby, make me write bad checks,"

I'm not sure why that made me such a fan - till this day I don't know why you would want a baby to hurt you. (Do a take or a slow burn; let the audience know you're messing with them) **(Structure: Simple Truth, Laughter Triggers: Surprise, configurational)**

But it was probably Rick's slightly warped sense of humor that connected with me; it reminded another odd person who was just as warped... ME. **(Structure: Reverse Laughter Trigger: superiority, surprise).**

Til this day, I'm not sure which connects with me the most; the humor or the 'warped.' Either way, I listened to him almost every day. He always played great music, always made me laugh and he I'm sure he made me write some bad checks. **(Structure: Three-way build-up. Laughter Trigger: Recognition).**

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So you can see if this intro was delivered to a large group of distinguished broadcasters that the subtlety of the jokes wouldn't take away from the intent of the speech.

There was another 10 minutes to that speech, but for the sake of time and to get you going on your own speeches, I just showed you what could be done in an intro.

At the end of that speech Harvey Weinstein (President of Lionsgate Films) came up to David Sheehan and said, "I've know you 30 years. I didn't know David Sheehan was funny."

So that's it in a nutshell. Write the speech first then follow the process to add some laughs.

In this segment, I only used 4 Comedy Structures to create laugh points for the speaker. There are 13 Major Comedy Structures and understanding them all gives you an amazing and powerful advantage when it comes to writing humorous speeches.



When you sit in one of my comedy writing workshops, you get to apply the techniques like a surgeon and when you do it well you could induce side-splitting laughter with your audience and if you're splitting sides, they'll need to come back and visit the surgeon again and again.