

How To Be Funny, Part 1: For Humans

If you've never gotten off a good joke in your life, start here



HERO THOUSANDFACES

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I am an only child. I didn't have a lot of nearby cousins or family friends or really even neighbors my age growing up; I spent a lot of time with my parents, and their friends, watching SNL reruns. I love classic SNL. Yeah, I said it: I actually like old SNL. Newer seasons get a bad rep despite how good it can be (Sarah Sherman is a standout gem and powerful representation for theyfabs with bad haircuts everywhere), but

in its heydays it was *good*. Chris Farley! Norm MacDonald! Skip ahead a few years to Tina Fey! Chevy Chase before we knew he was evil! Holy shit, Tina Fey again! Mr. Show, of the same era, is also hysterical. You can learn a lot from watching these old “skit” TV shows; one thing you realize watching scripted skits is how *technical* comedic talent can be.

We live in an era of comedic overproliferation. You probably laugh out loud more times a day than someone in the 80s when SNL was at its peak (controlled for amount of coke done at the desk). There’s a lot of really good scripted comedy, and even more good improv/accidental comedy, because these people are becoming very *technically competent*. The really good scripted TikToks that we love are also by people who are very *technically competent*. This is a really good example of that, below, and one we’re going to come back to and dissect.

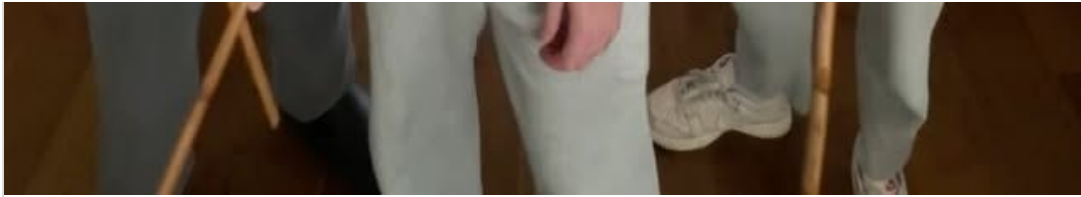
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**POV: us as the
3 blind mice**





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Anyways — unrelated — people tell me I'm very funny. Not just family members, or people trying to sleep with me; my psychiatrist laughs at a lot of my jokes, even the really concerning ones, and I'm only paying him \$400 an hour, so clearly there must be something there. I also can be insufferable and abrasive, yet people still keep me around, so I think I can be considered funny at least sometimes and therefore am qualified to write on the subject.

There's a pervasive idea that comedy can't be taught; I don't think this is entirely true. I think you need a little innate talent and charisma and intelligence, but I also think these things can be taught and fostered.

I'm not going to get too into evopsych or scientific or philosophical theories of why things are funny, just observations I've made and things I've noticed. I think the philosophy of comedy is interesting and worth looking into, but that's not what this essay is about, I'm just spitballing my own ideas and experiences

What Is Funny

Rhythm (& Energy)

I would actually say this is component #1 of comedy and probably the most unteachably-teachable thing. There are some sentences that aren't actually funny at all on their own but are extremely funny if you read them in a certain way (like "everyone, everywhere, is super mad about everything, all the time"); likewise, there are some actions that are just

regular actions unless you get the timing right (like **finding out your coffee is decaf** and changing expressions accordingly).

There's no set formula to it. You can learn rhythm by dancing, playing the drums, listening to a lot of music, or formally studying poetry. You develop an "ear" for what words or deliveries are going to be funny and then you just follow it. There are certain combinations of sounds or actions that are pleasing to the ear, and certain combinations of sounds or actions that are really fucking funny.

("Wow", you say, "I thought you were going to give me an in depth technical analysis to help me be funny and instead you just say it's based on vibes". No, I said that comedy can be *learned* through *work*, not from reading a single blog post. Lazy ass.)

Anyway, here's some starting places:

- I think listening to and dissecting the structure of **song lyrics** and particularly **rap** with Genius helped a lot with my understanding of rhythm and meter. I say particularly rap because there's a longstanding tradition of building a verse into a punchline, usually a pun.

- You need to be **reading**, a lot. Being well-read expands your reference pool of things you can accurately make jokes about, and it exposes you to lots of words, and lots of ways to stitch those words together to prove a point.
 - In particular reading and analyzing **poetry** is really, really useful for this. If you've never read or don't care for poetry — first of all, I bet you don't eat Brussels sprouts and are getting ready to type something really bitchy and self-defensive in my comments section, like "I HATE poetry and my friends all say I'm funny!!" Maybe they feel sorry for you? I certainly do. Poetry is such a wonderful addition to life. Consider starting at, Christ, I don't know, Shel Silverstein? I really like William Butler Yeats. Mary Oliver is quite good too. I don't recommend Rupi Kaur, or any poet that posts what they write on apps with dedicated short video tabs.
- For God's sake get into **Shakespeare**. Try *Twelfth Night* on for size, there's a lot of dick jokes in that one. Don't just read the scripts like you're in English class, though — catch a real performance (on TV or with your local theater company) so you can hear the deliveries and the lovely heartbeat of the iambic pentameter. Or read it out loud to yourself. Build the confidence you need to make a fool of yourself in front of a crowd. Hell, write some bits in iambic pentameter. Listen to the rise and fall of it. Figure out what words go well together.

- Watching **standup** is one of the best ways to build this muscle. I watched standup religiously as a child and developed a very autistic sense of how to build jokes into punchlines because I did not have a lot of other examples of how to talk to people, and now I just sort of talk like I'm on a late night show as a default. You can watch a lot of standup and repeat those jokes to your friends who don't watch standup to fool them into thinking you're hilarious, just to understand how the deliveries feel in your mouth.
 - [Rhythms of Comedy \(here's another one\)](#) is super useful for sort of auditorially-visualizing (auralizing?) the...well...rhythms of comedy. You can see how the joke builds and hits and holds back and measures itself in real-time. OH, that's another important thing: **negative space**. You have to know when to hold back and let the crowd sit for a bit.
- Certain **Twitter accounts**: Donald Trump's old tweets are hysterical, and the way he capitalizes particular words shows has an excellent command of rhythm. You can tell he's a Broadway queen. [donald boat](#) is really good at picking words that flow well and posting based on that; i would consider him a Classically Trained Shitposter and he has a very good understanding of inherently funny words. I also quite like [sabatonfan69](#) who has a good mind for satire and making up phrases that I quote all the time ("Michael city is real" "he's trying to fuck the elf!"). [dril](#), obviously.
- Learning how to **dance**. I have no advice to offer on this; I am a terrible dancer. I think opening your hips is a good start, because I saw the author of [this thread](#) at a party once with her boyfriend and was compelled to turn and tell my friend "holy shit, they're REALLY good at dancing". Which leads me to assume opening your hips will also help you be good at dancing, which will help you be good at rhythm, which will help you be good at Funny.

Side-note: Energy

Both of the linked Rhythms of Comedy videos really illustrate the energy and intensity of Mulaney (super high-energy; in the thralls of severe cocaine addiction) versus Seinfeld. Jerry is less fast than John, but I wouldn't say he's lower-energy, because he comes off as really...I think *intense* is the right word. The point being they both have a lot of energy, and I think understanding this is a really important part of spoken or standup comedy. I think a lot of comedians get manic onstage. Part of it is just how it feels being onstage; it's hard to get onstage and not feel weirdly intense, like there's something about to pop out from behind your eyeballs. I'm definitely very manic about this, even sober, and when the ball gets rolling for me on jokes I get more and more intense about it. I think people will laugh if you make them believe what you're saying is funny, and if you're really intense about what they're saying they'll believe you.

But that's not to say being high-energy or manic is the only way to do it. If you're naturally a more laid-back person, don't try to force being manic. You gotta find that stuff within you. People hate artifice, even when you're doing a bit. They talk about this in clown school — the clown is already within you, you're just exaggerating it. (Clown school, I've been told, is *extremely* intense.) Modulating that energy is important. The British *excel* at super-low-energy deadpan comedy, and that stuff is very good. [Philomena Cunk](#) feels a little bit like she's on downers, but she says really stupid shit with a straight face and a funny accent. (I'm writing this from the office while my code compiles, and "do you like ABBA?" made me have to take a few moments to recollect so I wouldn't disturb people around me).

Anyway, rhythm and energy aren't everything; you also have to know what it is you want to say or do.

Intelligence

A lot of really funny things come from being able to think quickly and identify patterns or totally novel solutions. which a lot of standardized

tests recognize as “intelligence”. You should probably read more books and watch classic movies and consume things with a critical eye, but if you’re here you’re probably quite bright already. In lieu of trying to teach you to be more smart because there’s lots of podcasts and grifters that are trying to do so already we can start identifying some (not all) Types Of Joke.

The basis of all comedy is ***Thing You Don’t Expect***. This is called the “incongruity theory” of comedy. This gets kind of complicated if you’re like me and your mind immediately jumps to an edge case like a *running gag*, wherein the joke is repeated and is funny because it’s repetitive. But a running gag is still funny because it’s something you don’t really expect to happen in the first place. You don’t expect a brick to fall out of the sky normally, but if you telegraph it by telling a 5 minute long joke that leads to nowhere before another 5 minute long joke that leads to a brick falling out of the sky, then it is both telegraphed and still unexpected — “the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”, according to Kant, who wrote quite a bit on I.T. along with Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, three people that we definitely think of as being funny and enjoyable to read.

Anyway, it’s impossible to write a script for all possible funny jokes. Comedy is based just as much on time and circumstance as it is anything else; think of an inside joke with a friend or partner that would make 0 sense to an outside observer. But — in the interest of providing jumping-off points to the comedically disinclined — I offer 3 potential Types of Joke that you could make in a given situation.

- ***This Thing Is Like Another Thing***

This is a really good and common Type Of Joke. Some notable subcategories of this type include *Gender Commentary* and *White People Be Like*. Essentially, this is when you say “has anyone ever noticed the ways in which X resembles Y?”. It’s funny because it plays to something people recognize (and people like to recognize things; it lets them feel

smart and like they're a part of something. Maybe this is also why we like *Call-Backs* and *Running Gags*) but also introduces something new and unexpected — a correlation between the two.

You have to be able to draw comparisons between things that other people don't immediately notice, which takes a degree of pattern recognition and also knowing a lot of things to draw connections between. I think this is where being a smartypants comes in handy — seeing these connections and coming up with a novel way to describe them is **correlated positively with IQ**, which, while flawed, is one of the most robust existing paradigms with which intelligence is described.

People really like and relate to this type of joke. The Median Voter (derogatory) likes shiny new things, but also is scared of the unfamiliar, and this allows a comforting synthesis of the two. The trick is to draw a comparison or point something out that isn't, like, bone-dead obvious. But also it needs some certain ineffable thing to keep it from just being a regular metaphor. "LLMs are like a slime mold in that they are grown from data, and more discovered than built" isn't very funny. "LLMs are like the mold from the Thai food at the back of your fridge: you don't know how it's going to grow and their properties are really more discovered than built" is...kind of funny? "LLMs are like a slime mold: it writes better code than a Jane Street intern" is probably about as good as I can get on this template.

Given that, when joking, **experienced comedians showed the most activation in their temporal lobe, which is the part of the brain dedicated to information comprehension and spontaneous association** this could be considered the Most Important Type of Joke, but I'm not sure. I'm not a doctor.

Good examples: literally any variation on "women be shopping"/"men are stupid", racism humor, a lot of *Family Guy*, jokes about current celebrity drama or riffs on Current Discourse, a lot of standup but

particularly Jerry Seinfeld (“what’s the deal with...?”). Most forms of puns and wordplay, I would say, are a kind of this.

- ***This Thing Is Not Like Anything***

You could also call it ***Unfamiliarity Comedy***. This joke type is funny because it’s really stupid or something you don’t expect. A lot of these aren’t as appealing as This Thing Is Like Other Thing, which has the broadest mainstream appeal; This Thing Is Not Like Anything may leave onlookers baffled and saying “what?”. But a lot of my favorite jokes are of this type. Consider a dog walking into a room on stilts; that’s probably something you’ve never seen before, and it’s pretty funny.

This borrows heavily from surrealism and Camus’ concept of the absurd. Already much has been written on Gen Z and Millennials using surrealism to cope with an increasingly fucked up and incomprehensible world. Go read one of those essays for more on that; they were really big in, like, 2018.

This one can be tricky to pull off because requires understanding on a very deep level multiple things. The first, of course, is rhythm. The dog (I picture a Dauchsund) has to enter the room at exactly the right time, it has to totter around on stilts, and then it has to, again at exactly the right time, fall in a very silly way *!!!that does not make it look like it got hurt!!!* It is IMPERATIVE that no dogs are hurt. There is nothing sadder than an injured dog. And if God forbid you do hurt a dog, you have to do so in a way that’s so completely over-the-top that it crosses the line twice and winds up funny again. For example, if the Dauchsund fell and broke all of its legs, that wouldn’t be funny to anyone. If it explodes, that’s hilarious.

Also, as a general rule, any bit that involves an animal is a million times funnier if that animal is a monkey. But you can’t get too weird with it. A monkey on stilts walks into a room, totters around for a bit, and explodes. The stilts fall to the ground. That’s not really funny anymore;

that's Lynchian (RIP), which *can* be funny, but it's not really supposed to be.

I guess it depends on the room.

Good examples: most of *Smiling Friends*, a lot of X Out Of Context twitter accounts or youtube videos, any bit where someone randomly starts screaming. A LOT of memes, basically modern internet culture in general comes from absurd humor/brainrot. Have you ever gone through a Cards Against Humanity black card deck and just read them out loud with your friends because you're too lazy to play the game, with no context? Very much like that. Oh, and *Community*.

- ***This Thing Is***

Somewhere in between the first two: kind of just presenting a situation and letting you figure out the rest. This is where I'm putting observational humor and cringe comedy. Observational humor can be bundled in with This Thing Is Like. I would say a lot of sitcoms fall into this category — *That 70s Show* and *The Office* in particular.

It's beginning to feel very difficult to put things into these arbitrary categories that I just made up. I'm starting to lose hope. I'm second guessing everything. I keep trying to make up new categories and deleting them. These drafts have been a disaster. I don't even know why I have this section in here; I don't think it's helping anyone get any funnier. Perhaps I am doing this as a form of torture.

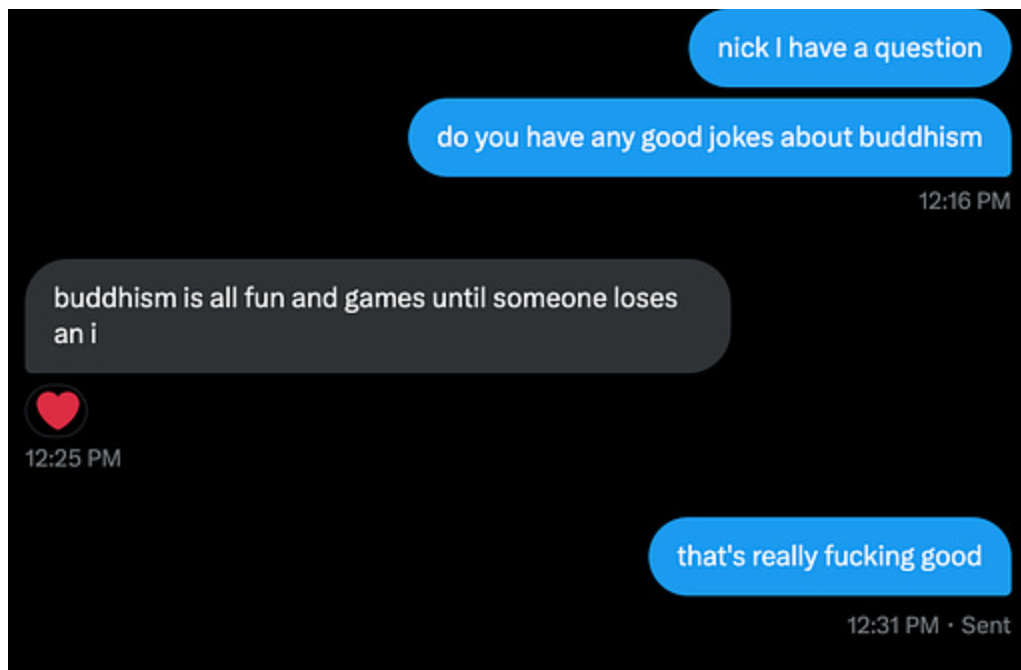
Notice how the above paragraph was kind of funny despite not really saying anything? That's because it just neutrally posited an unexpected situation. A lot of sitcoms rely on this — the humor is somewhere between completely surreal and totally familiar and relatable, mostly it's just by showing a situation and a laugh track.

Good examples: any SNL Jeopardy skit but *especially this one*, because the punchline is "isn't it funny that Sean Connery talks like that (and also

there's a funny hat). A Horse Walks Into A Bar, when it's not the type that's making a pun. [David Sedaris](#) (that's two different links, one for each word, by-the-way) does this possibly better than anyone and he's not chiefly a comedian most of the time, he's just a very good writer. His anecdotes biographies are very straightforward and stream-of-consciousness, and occasionally depict things that are really sad and very bleak, but he does it with *rhythm*. Any sitcom relying on cringe. An actually funny story, from someone that's actually good at telling funny stories and not holding you hostage at a party (very rare).

- ***Physical Comedy***

Speaks for itself. Someone uses their body or voice in such a way that it is really funny. This is kind of a subtype of This Thing Is but physical comedy is such an art on it's own that it deserves its own placement. You can't get this one over twitter and in many ways it is a dying art, because most normal people don't have the training to understand and use their body to such an extent that it is hilarious. I would say this falls under physical intelligence or understanding of the bodymind and can be reliably achieved by being a good dancer or athlete; less reliably you could attempt bodymind meditation. I say less reliably because I can't say I know of many intense meditators that are also really good at physical comedy, though this isn't to say that meditation can't help you with being funny.



side note: i was curious about the effect of intense meditation on jokes, so i asked @nickcammarata, my sitcom arch-nemesis, for one

The above video with the 3 blind mice has a LOT of really good (not too over-the-top) examples of this: the opening shot of them with their hands out, bumping into the walls/each other, facing away from the camera, pretending to read Braille, the one guy doing the broad shouldered stance while pretending to be Bane, using the cane like a gun. If I had to say why these are funny it's because they took an already funny concept (the 3 blind mice doing things you don't expect mice to do) and used their bodies to further their point.

But most forms of physical comedy are funny because they don't have any point. See: any popular video of a cat, where it's funny because cats are funny-shaped animals, we love them, and they're doing a silly thing.

Good examples: **CHRIS FUCKING FARLEY**. **Melissa McCarthy** — complete shamelessness and 110% dedication unites these two, as well as that massive manic energy. Prop comedy — I love it when the joke is that someone is wearing a stupid hat. Ferrets, just as a species. Farts.

Small children falling over. The vast majority of videos of cats. That one [TikToker](#) with a golden retriever that keeps hitting him in the face. Many Vines, but especially [this one](#).

Note: I would not recommend physical comedy in a day-to-day situation unless you are okay with concussions and potentially making people feel sorry for you.

Je ne sais quoi

Other factors I've seen in very funny people:

- Innate charisma or likability. Chillness with self. Understanding of their own ridiculousness and embracing it. Not giving a fuck if the joke lands or not, paradoxically, helps the joke land way better. This is part of why cats are so funny, I think: they don't care if you're laughing and will act like nothing is wrong immediately after doing the stupidest shit you've ever seen in your entire life.
 - I also think this is partially innate and partially trained — you can build charisma and confidence, but you also have to find the crowd you're comfortable in.

- Divorced parents or otherwise unstable childhood home life. My theory is this forces you to learn how to *communicate*, and a good part of comedy is communicating things in absurd ways. **This isn't to say you need to have had a shitty life to be funny:** Julia Louis-Dreyfus' dad is a billionaire and she's also beautiful and despite this **THE BEST TO EVER DO IT**. (Her parents are divorced, though, so my point still kind of stands.)
 - However, I don't know a lot of really, really funny people that don't also have massive personal demons. A lot of these funny people get famous and get therapy and all their material needs met and then really just kinda stop being quite as funny. The rest kill themselves. Comedy is a really good way to cope with a bleak situation; the upside to going through tough times is you get **good practice** with the riffs.
 - I don't think you should traumatize yourself to be funnier. I think you should **practice**, and childhood trauma helps you get your reps in.
- Being fat/ugly/gay/of a different race/visibly autistic as a kid, or otherwise a target for bullying. Again, my theory is that this helps you get in a lot of practice — you have to make people like you somehow, you have to cope with a bleak situation, you this very human need for connection and being liked and you have to deal with it outside of the normal ways.
- ADHD or cocaine addiction or anything that gives you too much goddamn energy. See the Farley and Mulaney clips above. Being able to commit 110% of your energy to something completely ridiculous indicates that something is funny. It will also ruin your life and relationships, unless you spend a lot of time drugging yourself and working to keep that battery-power under control, or — OR — make people laugh, and even then it might ruin your life regardless.

- Being able to at least kind of read the room and adapt to feedback. Your tight 5 for Sov House may not go over as well at Grandma's knitting circle.
- Life experience. It's hard to be funny if you just sit in a room and do nothing, though this is entirely possible; you need life to draw upon if you want to try and be creative. Go outside and Anthony Bourdain that shit.

TL;DR: lots (years!) of being forced to **practice** being funny; not taking it too hard if nobody laughs, but still being smart enough to read the room. Mainly, though, it's **a shit ton of practice** at a delicate age — just like any other skill.

I think Conan O'Brien is a really good example of the importance of **practice**. (Do not get in here and argue that Conan isn't funny because that man is a national treasure.) Like, [look at this](#) — eight minutes of straight riffing, no writers, nothing but the grace of God and charisma and, yes, practice. He wrote in high school, he edited the *Harvard Lampoon*, then wrote for various comedy shows, then SNL, then *The Simpsons* (he wrote "Marge vs. the Monorail"!), and then he went to *Late Night* and was fantastic, every night, because he was *practicing*. Conan works hard for the money and he knows what he's doing! I highly recommend his [Hot Ones](#) episode, wherein he talks about the intentionality and thought that goes into his late night shows and comedy, and he's funny as shit the entire time.

So, to cap this off with the same thesis, comedy in humans is — in my opinion — something that is partially dependent on innate traits of intelligence and rhythm but, largely, *can be taught*.

But what about non-humans?

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