

WRITING COMEDY THAT SELLS

by Brian Luff

Introduction

The first thing to do before you sit down and try and write a sketch, is to watch and read as many other comedy sketches as you can. Go to the library, borrow books, videos, tapes, records, lock yourself away and watch sketches until they come out of your ears. Study the masters of the art. Monty Python, Mel Brooks, The Fast Show, Saturday Night Live, French & Saunders, etc etc. This will help to teach you what is funny, but more importantly it will teach you what has been done before. This is vitally important. What's the point of writing something new, unless it is original???

Research

While you're watching, make notes. If you laugh at something, try and figure out why you're laughing. What was it that pushed the funny button in your brain? Something visual? Something to do with the way words were used? Or was it because the joke reminded you of something funny in your own life? Start to watch comedy in a different way. Take it apart and put it back together again. You'll soon start to notice that the same tricks are applied again and again and again.

Getting Started

Never sit down in front of a blank sheet of paper. You'll never think of a damned thing. Carry a notebook around with you for at least a week before you start, and write down anything you see or hear that makes you smile. At the end of the week, pick the best 3 ideas from your notes, think of titles for them and throw all the other ideas in the wastepaper basket.

Write the titles at the top of three separate pages, and then, working on all three sketches at the same time, write down everything you can think of connected to each of the three subjects. Just lists of words. Connections. Related subjects. When all three pages are full, pick the one with what looks like the best comic potential and put it on the top of the pile. You are now going to start writing your first sketch.

- 1) Choose a setting. Avoid common set-ups like doctor's surgeries or "Man Goes Into a Shop". Think original. Only set the sketch in one location.
- 2) Don't make the sketch too long. Two minutes is a good length to start with.
- 3) If you're trying to sell your material to TV, don't put in anything too expensive like a helicopter. Most TV shows are on a tight budget.
- 4) Three characters is more than enough for a 2 minute sketch. Don't write for a cast of thousands.
- 5) Work out loud. Say the lines as you write them. You need to hear what the material sounds like.
- 6) Think about what is happening visually as well as the words. Describe the physical action in detail. What are the characters wearing? What do they look like. What are their names? (Don't just call your characters FIRST MAN, SECOND MAN. It will help to bring them to life in your mind).

Brainstorming

Bounce comedy ideas off the people around you. Don't work in isolation. If you don't have a writing partner (which I highly recommend for this type of writing), throw funny ideas at your wife, boyfriend, brother, sister, teacher, mother, anyone who will listen. Even better would be to sit down in a room of around 6 people and brainstorm ideas in a group. Write down everything. Sift through it later. Hit shows like Friends and Frasier are sometimes written by as many as 12 people.

Where do the Ideas Come From?

If you're stuck, the best place to go looking for ideas for sketches is in big reference books like, for example, Halliwell's Film Guide. A book like this lists thousands and thousands of movie titles and plot lines. Stick a pin in, read a description of the film and see if it sparks off any funny ideas.

For example, your sketch could be a spoof of:

- 1) A western?
- 2) A space movie
- 3) An historical romance
- 4) A war film
- 5) A Hollywood musical
- 6) A documentary about snail farming in Gdansk.

"Put a Spin On It"

There are literally hundreds of thousands of potential starting points for a sketch. But once you find a subject, try not to approach it in an obvious way.. For example, if you're writing a sketch about hairdressers, don't set it in a hairdressing salon, set it half way up Mount Everest! (You may have seen a sketch like this in Monty Python)

Working Backwards

Sketches really should have a strong finish, so always work backwards. Here's how to do it: Think of the punchline first. If you can't think of one after ten minutes there probably isn't a good one there. If that happens, throw the whole idea into the bin and move onto your next sketch title.

Once you've got your funny ending, work out how to get there. Start by writing the line immediately before the funny end line. When you've worked out the whole of the last ten seconds of the sketch, it's probably safe to go and think about the beginning.

Types of Sketches

To help you get going, here's a few tried and tested comedy formats for sketches.

- 1) Escalation: Funny idea starts small and gets bigger and bigger, ending in chaos of ridiculous proportions.
- 2) Lists: Sketches in which the bulk of the dialogue is a long list of funny items. The best example of this is "Cheese Shop" in Monty Python. (You can find all the Python sketches at www.planetcomedy.force9.co.uk/bookstore.html.)
- 3) Mad Man, Sane Man: This format speaks for itself, but don't go for obvious settings.
- 4) Dangerous Situations: For example, sketch set on flight deck of aircraft.
- 5) Funny Words: Sketches which use the sound of language itself to be funny. For example, use of the words "blobby" or "wobble" (See, Mr. Bean).
- 6) Old and New: Getting a laugh from putting something modern in an historical setting (Or, vice versa) Example: Sir Walter Raleigh using a cigarette lighter.
- 7) Big and Small. Getting humour from large differences in scale. For example, a mouse trying to make love to an elephant.

Edit Your Work

When you have finished writing your sketch remember: it is only the first draft. Go back and look at it again. Improve it. Change it. Make it funnier. If there isn't a big laugh at least every fifteen seconds, put one in. Then "Sleep On It". Go to bed and look at your material when you wake up in the morning. If it's still as funny as you thought it was when you wrote it, great! If it isn't, throw it away. Don't waste your time trying to rescue an idea that doesn't work. Go onto writing a new sketch. Be brutal with your own work. Only try and sell work you are totally happy with.

Hit Rate

For every good sketch you write you should be throwing away about ten. Think of sketch writing as being a totally disposable art form. Don't be precious about your work. Comedy is as much about what you don't write and what you do. But remember: Whatever you do, keep scribbling.

Get Clues

You must be persistent. If the editor or producer you're sending work to doesn't want to buy it, ask him or her why? If he doesn't want your type of material what DOES he want? Ask him. Try and get a few clues as to what your man finds funny: Does he like Jim Carey or John Cleese? In the long term, this will help you to write material that he will buy.

Layout

If you're trying to sell your material, lay it out properly. Put your name and address on every sheet, number all the pages, and be consistent with your layout. Most writers use CAPITALS to describe location and action, CAPITALS for character names (set above the dialogue) and the rest in lower case.

Example:

BBC 040499/4

HIGHWAYMAN QUICKIE by Brian Luff

EXT. DAY. A MOTORWAY

BIG CLOSE UP OF "DICK-TURPIN"-LIKE HIGHWAYMAN.

HIGHWAYMAN

Stand and deliver! Your money or your life !!!

CUT TO WIDE-SHOT HIGHWAYMAN STANDING ON THE HARD SHOULDER OF THE M6 MOTORWAY. A CAR HURTLES PAST AT 95 MPH.

HIGHWAYMAN

Oh, crap!

Summary

Study other writer's work. Make plenty of notes before you start. Keep the writing short, tight and with as few people in it as possible. Brainstorm. Avoid common set-ups and expensive props. Plough through movie reference books for useful genres. Think about the visuals as well as the words. Work backwards from the end. Avoid crap plays on words or puns. If it's not funny enough when you read it the next day, throw it away and write something funnier. Good luck. (You'll need it)

Bibliography

Books on Writing Comedy:

Comedy Writing Step by Step by Gene Perret, Carol Burnett

This is probably the best book about writing comedy I've read. It really explains to you in detail not only how to write sketch comedy material, but how to write for stand-up and sitcoms. You can get more jokes per topic with Gene Perret's method than any other joke writing method I've seen.

Comedy Writing Secrets by Melvin Helitzer

Enter the dark, dank and mysterious world of comedy writing. We at Planet Comedy love this book... it's funny, intelligent, and packed with great ideas for writing comedy.

Funny Business: The Craft of Comedy Writing by Sol Saks

Writing comedy is a serious business! God knows, we here at Planet Comedy know that. Ask our bank managers !!! But this book could be just what you need to get the creative juices flowing (if you pardon the expression) Check this book out. The guy knows what he's talking about!

The Comic Toolbox - How to Be Funny Even If You're Not by John Vorhaus

The two most gratifying comments I hear about The Comic Toolbox are that it reveals me as a person and writer to the reader, and that the reader (inevitably a new writer) found it to be a crucially useful tool at a certain point in his / her evolution. I like to help writers! - John Vorhaus

Examples of good comedy writing:

The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus (1): All the Words by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam

The complete scripts Part One. What better way to study comedy scriptwriting than to study the work of the best TV sketch writers of all time. It's all here... from cheese shops to parrots. And don't let anyone tell you this stuff is dated. Python still represents the most inventive and inspired sketch comedy ever to hit both the small and the big screen.

The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus (2): All the Words by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam

The complete Python scripts Part Two. If you thought Part One was great, then you'll just love Part Two. And probably find it similar in many ways.

The Seinfeld Scripts : The First and Second Seasons by Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David. Paperback - 526 pages (May 1998).

What can we say about this book? This is the funniest man in the world. Trust us. Buy this publication or die unfulfilled.

**Planet Comedy write, perform and direct comedy for theatre, radio and television. Writer and producer Brian Luff has written for several TV sketch series, and has directed numerous television shows in the cable and satellite industry, as well as comedy promotions for BBC Television. Brian appeared for several years on the Edinburgh Fringe with the sketch team, Comedy Factory and featured in the infamous late-night revue Strictly Bathroom. In the persona of an outrageous sixties poet, Brian Luff is an increasingly well-known character on both the Internet and the comedy club circuit.

Planet Comedy are currently developing a radio show The Crane Drain, featuring Spitting Image impressionist Jessica Martin and TV presenter Andy Crane. (This show will shortly be broadcast on one of the Internet's first live radio stations) Planet Comedy also recently opened a weekly comedy club in Maidstone in the south of England (UK). For BBC2's award-winning promotions department, Planet Comedy producers created the infamous "I think pants is a very funny word" trailer for Friday night's Comedy Zone. Their nerdy creation Roger Singleton aka Andrew Barclay was later used by Channel 4 in a rival promotional campaign.

For Channel 5, Planet Comedy have written a wealth of sketch material for the outrageous and fast-moving sketch show We Know Where

You Live. They have also contributed material to ITV's Six Pairs of Pants and Saturday Live. In 1996 Planet Comedy produced and presented the UK's first cable-interactive stand-up comedy show Cosmic Comedy. For hugely successful UK satellite channel Challenge TV, Planet Comedy's Brian Luff produced and directed the nightly telephone-interactive programme strand Prizetime, as well as writing and directing numerous on-air promotions and humorous commercials for the channel. Planet Comedy's Brian Luff was one of the creative team behind the massively successful UK version of legendary Japanese torture gameshow Endurance, although he was not directly responsible for live maggots being sprinkled on the faces of contestants.