Joke-Structure Guide

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Note to readers: The PDF version of the Joke Structure Guide has several video links. Click the blue links to watch the videos. First time readers are encouraged to watch all the example videos.

Joke Types: Introduction

Joke Types, also known as "joke-formats" or "joke-structures" is **a way of organizing your setup and punchline to force a comedic conflict**.

Main Goal of These Lessons

The main purpose of this section is NOT to learn conventional joke-writing strategies (which is included at the bottom of each lesson). The main purpose of these lessons is to introduce practical, relatable examples of comedic conflict so that you will be comfortable with the idea of comedic conflict when it comes time to write your own material. This will make writing process MUCH EASIER because comedic conflict is very flexible and forgiving.

Conventional Jokes Are Needlessly Difficult

Conventional joke writing has tons of rules. They usually require a strict process, near-perfect word placement and a very rigid structure. The result is that new comedians tend to "miss the forest through the trees." There are so many small details and steps to take that it's almost impossible to stay focused on the part of comedy that you love… BEING FUNNY!

Example: Rule of Three

For example, the **RULE OF THREE** joke format always lists 3 items. The 1st and 2nd item are common while the 3rd item breaks the pattern created by the other two. This is a very common way of creating comedic conflict by creating a "**BROKEN PREDICTION**." The Rule of Three is highly structured, meaning you can't play around with it. You either do it or you don't. However, Broken Predictions are super-easy to make and achieve the same results. This is much closer aligned to how you NATURALLY make people laugh.

Quick Tips

Don't explicitly use these joke formats. **If you ever catch yourself asking "Should I use a Rule Of Three joke here?" … then you're missing the point**. Best case scenario, you will come out VERY mechanical and choppy. However, if you understand how to create the comedic conflict then you'll no longer have to worry about the structure of the material.

Joke formats are probably the **most over-emphasized** part of stand-up comedy. Today joke formats play a much smaller role than they did in early stand-up comedy. They still do have their place in stand-up comedy… just not in the spotlight.

Joke formats are very useful for:

1. **Learning the basics** of stand-up comedy (We're using them to discover more about comedic conflict)
2. **Punching up your material**. (We can always go back after our writing and punch-up material using these strategies)

Summary: Intro to Joke Types

1. Use joke formats to A) Learn the basics of comedy and B) punch-up your material

2. Don't try to write "into" a joke format. It almost always leads to awkward sounding material or a weak punchline. Use Comedic Conflict instead.

Broken Assumptions

Every time you speak you're giving the listener information about the who, what, where, when, why, or how of your story. Some of this information is **EXPLICIT**, meaning you actually say it. The rest is **IMPLICIT**, meaning the listener assumes it.

Lets take a normal sentence, like"I went to the grocery store." The sentence explicitly tells you WHO ("I") and WHERE ("grocery store"), but not WHAT, WHEN, WHY, or HOW. So 2 pieces of information are explicit (written in green)

<p align="center">Who – What – Where – When – Why – How</p>

Next, you make assumptions: You know GROCERY STORE, so it's **IMPLIED** that I want to buy food. You likely assume that I drove a car or walked as well. Now you have 4 pieces of information (the assumptions are in red):

<p align="center">Who – What – Where – When – Why – How</p>

I call the break from the assumption to the new interpretation "shifts" because **the punchline shifts the original understanding of the joke**. The safety of the joke comes from the first interpretation. The punchline

creates a violation by changing one of the assumptions created. Conventional jokes almost always use these "shifts" to create humor.

Take this setup from Steve Martin:

I gave my cat a bath the other day… they love it. He sat there, he enjoyed it, and it was fun for me too.

As an audience member, here's what we EXPLICITLY know (green):

Who – What – Where – When – Why – How

And here's what we can safely assume (red).

Who – What – Where – When – Why – How

Where = "the bathroom" Why = "the cat was dirty" and How = "He put the cat in the bath"

Now the punchline will break one of our assumptions.

I gave my cat a bath the other day… they love it. He sat there, he enjoyed it, and it was fun for me too. The fur would stick to my tongue, but other than that… (Steve Martin)

Safety/Violation:

He put the cat in the bathtub vs. He licked his cat

Here's an example from Bill Engvall. Notice what information you assume as you read through.

[Golf] So finally, on about the fifteenth tee, I hit the drive of my life… And I watch this ball just go and go and . . . kind of hit this guy in the head. And I felt bad, but he overreacted, I thought. I mean, it wasn't like a square hit; it just kind of glanced off his head. But he goes whippin' his car off the freeway, like "here we go!" Mr. Attitude! (Bill Engvall)

Safety/Violation:

A person on a golf course vs. A person driving on the highway

This is a "**who-shift**." Engvall hides the true identity of the guy he hit with the ball until he reveals that wasn't actually another golfer (or assumption), but a driver. He didn't talk about the when, nor do we make assumptions about it. The when is entirely left out.

Who – What – Where – When – Why – How

Leave Out Some Info

Notice that **WHEN** is often undefined. This is the most common piece of information to leave out because it usually doesn't play a role in the story or joke. In my example, I say that I "went" to the store, so you know it's in the past… but that's all. If the actual date/time doesn't matter, either don't mention it or use a short phrase like "The other day" or "I once went to …" Both Steve Martin and Bill Engvall skipped the "when" in the examples. They keep it very generic so that they can move on to more important information.

Recall that an audience needs to go through 3 stages to understand a joke: **construction, recognition, and resolution**. During construction the listener picks out what they think will be important information. By editing out the WHEN in our joke, the comedian makes it easier for the audience to figure out what information will be important to the punchline. **Do not give the audience too much info** or they will have to sort through tons of information to construct a joke.

Summary: Broken Assumptions

1. When you speak, you are giving the listener both **EXPLICIT** and **IMPLICIT** information about the **Who, What, Where, When, Why,** and **How** of your story.

2. The audience creates assumptions based on the explicit information. These assumptions are then broken in the punchline.

3. "When" is often left out of material or quickly brushed aside with a comment like "lately" or "awhile back"

Exaggerations

A very common joke formula is Exaggeration. Exaggerations are used both inside and outside of joke formats. Outside of joke formats, comedian Dane Cook used exaggeration very effectively in his storytelling. Exaggerations have a way of bringing a story to life. Exaggeration, like most joke formats, gets its humor from incongruency. Notice how Cook uses a lot of exaggerations in the video below, but he's not always trying to create punchlines… he's just trying to make the story more interesting. (Dane Cook: Kool-Aid Man)

Comedian Ron White uses exaggeration in a joke format very effectively in his line:

> *"We were on a plane 'that' big… like a pack of bubble gum with 8 people on it."*

In order to create an exaggeration from a joke format, take your punchline's key word/s (the one/s that makes it funny) and see if you can stretch it one way or the other. If the joke is about size (like Ron White's joke) than ask yourself "What's really small/big" and fit it inside your joke until you find the right one. It might take some adjusting, as the first few ideas will likely either over-exaggerate or not go far enough. In our Ron White example the

first ideas might have been either too small ("size of a termite") or too large ("Size of a bus") to be funny.

Over-exaggeration will harm your trustworthiness. If you over-exaggerate the punchline, the audience sees you trying to stretch the joke too far and it "tears the joke." There's too much violation and not enough safety.

If you **under-exaggerate the punchline then it might come out boring**. There can be too much safety and not enough violation.

Find The Best Level of Exaggeration

The biggest problem new comedian run into while using the exaggeration technique is not optimizing the amount of exaggeration they use. Allow yourself to play around with this technique. Purposefully find how much exaggeration you can get away with. Not only will it make writing more fun, but it'll also teach you how to use exaggerations effectively.

How To Write An Exaggeration

In this example, lets write about an experience you had recently.

1. **Write a few sentences** about an experience
2. Look over what you've written and **find ideas that can exaggerated** (size, emotional reactions, etc.)
3. **Rewrite** or **add on** to what you've written using the exaggeration.
4. **Rewrite** the joke so that it flows better.

MY EXAMPLE:

1. I went to Costco. That store is huge.
2. (I'll exaggerate "huge")
3. I went to Costco. That store is **huge**. It's so **huge** that I didn't realize they sold camping gear … I thought people just gave up and pitched a tent.
4. I went to Costco. That store is huge… I didn't realize they sold camping gear … I thought people just gave up and pitched a tent.

Misplaced Sincerity

Misplaced Sincerity is one of my favorite joke formats. This is where the comedian pretends to lack a certain knowledge or awareness of what the audience knows to be true. Listen to any Steve Martin CD and you'll hear plenty of misplaced sincerity. Here's an example from Martin (**Steve Martin: French Video**):

> *"I went to France. If you go to France let me give you a warning… "Chapeau," means "Hat"… …"Oeuf," means "Egg"… … It's like those French have a different word for EVERYTHING!"*

SAFETY: How a normal person would understand or interpret something.
VIOLATION: The comedians incorrect understanding or interpretation.
COMEDIC CONFLICT: Misplaced sincerity creates comedic conflict by allowing the audience to see two sides of the same situation at the same time.

The misplaced sincerity is easy to catch in the Steve Martin example. Martin **pretends he doesn't understand** there are other languages besides English. **The audience is allowed to simultaneously view both their own POV as well as Steve Martin's POV**. The incongruency between Steve Martin's POV and the audience's create comedic conflict.

Another great example of misplaced sincerity is from Eddie Izzard. Izzard received an applause break when he briefly stopped his material on Ireland and said to his American crowd "You do know there are other countries?"

Obviously, yes. But Izzard delivered this line as if he wasn't 100% sure. Just as in our Steve Martin example, **the audience was allowed to see two different POV's at once**. They saw it from their own perspective as well as an outside perspective.

In the audience's mind they knew he was **playfully teasing Americans** for being egotistical and oblivious to world events. The audience got to experience both of these viewpoints at one time. The playfulness made it safe instead of insulting. The conflict between the two is what created the humor.

How To Write Misplaced Sincerity

Misplaced Sincerity is a fun technique to use. I suggest using it to punch-up material rather than "write into" a joke. Start with something pre-written.

1. **Begin** with something pre-written or write a few sentences of a setup.
2. Find any ideas or phrases that are **easy to misunderstand** or **require specific knowledge** (phrases like "Go jump on a horse" or "Raining cats and dogs" are easy)
3. **Ask yourself** "What would happen if I misunderstood or didn't have this information?"
4. Write a **follow-up** that assumes you "missed the point"

Contradictions

Contradiction is a mixture of **misplaced sincerity, irony, and POV humor.**

In a contradiction, the comedian says a line that contradicts what he's meaning to say. The misplaced sincerity comes from the fact that the comedian fails to notice that the line is contradictory to either the words he's using, the actions he's taking, or who the audience knows him to be.

There are 2 important characteristics to a good contradiction: **speed** and **believability**.

The contradiction must be fast enough for the audience to compare the 2 POVs. As a general rule, you have about 1-2 lines to create the contradiction.

Second, the contradiction should be believable. Contradictions are easy to make… contradictions that don't feel forced are difficult. If you tell a story about a vegetarian eating a hot dog, you have to give the audience a good reason to believe it's happening or the entire joke will feel forced. There will be very little safety and too much violation.

Like all types of POV Humor, the humor comes from the audience's ability to see two different POV's at the same time. (POV Humor is explored in more depth in the advanced level of Faster & Funnier)

3 types of contradictions:

1. Words contradict Words
2. Words contradict Actions
3. Words contradict What Audience Already Knows

Words v. Words

The simplest type of contradiction is having your words contradict other words or the manner in which the words are said.

One example of this comes from Steve Martin:

> *"But it's an intellectual town, and I'm an intellectual 'Kiiinndd' of guy."*

In this example Martin uses his 'dumb voice' when saying he's an intellectual. By drawing out the word "kind" he creates contradiction between saying he's an intellectual and saying the line like he's stupid. The conflict between these two ideas creates humor.

Sarcasm falls in this category. Sarcasm gets humor from a comedic conflict between words and HOW the words are said. When using sarcasm, the words you say are contradicted by the voice you use (i.e., saying "you're a genius" in a way that means "You're an idiot").

Words v. Actions

Another form of contradiction is **using your words to contradict your actions**. The best example of this type of contradiction also comes from Steve Martin when he told the audience,

> *"I can "Drink as much alcohol as I want… And it doesn't affect me!" [Loses balance and crashes into the mic stand]*

Words v. What Audience Already Knows

The last type of contradiction I will highlight is **using your words to contradict something already known** (such as who the audience knows you to be). A great example of this type of contradiction comes from monotone comedian Steven Wright when he opened up a show saying, "I'm feelin' kinda hyper." The audience knows Steven Wright for his dry voice and lack of inflection, not something you associate with being hyper. Saying "I'm hyper" completely contradicted who the audience knew him to be. This comedic conflict between these two ideas caused the humor.

In all of the examples I've listed above the humor comes out of the conflict between two contrary ideas. The laughter doesn't come from the words themselves, but from the POV of the person saying those words. Because it's a type of POV joke, it's very important to sell these jokes with a lot of confidence. For a contradiction to work, the comedian (or whoever is committing the contradiction) must be unaware of it.

How To Write a Contradiction

1. Start with a piece of pre-written material or go step-by-step.

2. Decide if **you or someone else** will be making the contradiction (a good rule of thumb is to give the contradiction to whoever you want to be seen as stupid).

3. Search for any **factual statements or opinions that can be contradicted** (i.e., "I'm a vegetarian" or "I don't get mad easily.")

4. **What is the contradiction?** (i.e., "eating meat or something unhealthy" or "getting mad easily")

   1. Ask yourself: **How and/or why will the contradiction be made?** (If your friend 'doesn't get mad easily'… ask yourself: Under what circumstances will the person contradict himself?

5. Use your setup to **setup the situation and deliver the factual statement or opinion**.

   1. **What happens after the person makes the factual statement** that makes him contradict? (create that circumstance in your setup)

6. Use the punchline to introduce the contradiction.

7. **Rewrite your setup and punchline** a few times until they flow

To recap:

1. Contradictions should be **FAST** and **BELIEVABLE**

2. **3 General Types of Contradictions**

    1. Words contradict **Words**

    2. Words contradict **Actions**

    3. Words contradict **What Audience Already Knows**

Rule of Three

The rule of three is perhaps the best known type of joke format.

The Rule of Three joke format is when you have a list of two similar-objects/actions and one that doesn't belong. The first two objects/actions create a pattern. The third breaks that pattern.

SAFETY: The 1st and 2nd items in a list (these items share something in common)

VIOLATION: The 3rd item in a list (which is very different from the first 2)

COMEDIC CONFLICT: Comedic conflict comes from breaking the audience's assumptions about what the third item in the list will be.

Here's a popular joke using the Rule of Three.

> *"3 men were on a deserted island and found a genie. The genie gave each one wish. The first wished he could be back home with his family and poof! He was gone. The second said he wished he could be back in his hometown and poof! He was gone. The third person's wish was "I want my friends back."*

This is a great example of the Rule of Three. The first two designate a pattern of wanting to be home. The third breaks the pattern by wishing for something else, which incidentally negates the other two. This joke format works because it breaks the audience's assumption that the third person is going to wish for something similar to the first two.

This joke formula isn't as effective today because, if you don't hide it well enough, the audience can easily tell that the third item is going to break their assumption. So instead of "assuming the third item will be the same" they actually get ahead of you and assume that the third item will be different… they just don't know HOW it will be different. This is why it can be so difficult to get away with this joke type. If you use it, make sure you hide it well and that there's a good payoff in the end.

Summary: Rule of Three

1. Comedian gives the audience a list containing 3 items. Item #1 and #2 create a pattern (safety). Item #3 breaks the pattern.
2. Rule of Three is extremely difficult to use effectively. Most audiences have seen enough comedy or heard enough jokes to understand that the third item is going to be a surprise that breaks their assumptions… which means they never make an assumption in the first place.

Pun / Double-Entendre

The double-entendre, better known as a pun, is often said to be the lowest form of humor. The reason for this is because coming up with a corny pun is extremely easy. You can take almost any word in the English language, find an alternate meaning, and then create a pun from it.

Many comedians have used puns very effectively to create good quality humor. Here is an example of a pun by British comedian Jimmy Carr:

> *"I got a friend, she's got a theory. She reckons the way to drive a man wild with desire is to nibble on his earlobes for hours and hours… I think it's bollox."*

In this pun the word bollox has two different meanings. The first way the word is interpreted is to mean "A lie" or "B.S." Soon after the audience arrives at the first meaning of the term the audience realizes that the comedian is saying more than what was gleaned from the first interpretation. If the comedian were to keep talking, the pun would have been lost. If Carr said "I think it's bollox because…" the audience would have retained their first definition of the word and not inquired further. The comedian indirectly hinted at the pun when he stopped talking. This leads the audience to re-define the term 'bollox' to mean "testicles," where the audience arrives at the humor.

PUN PRACTICE

Let's take a look at some examples of puns to learn how to write our own. Many puns begin with a word or phrase that has a double-meaning. These puns only have a single step to solve.

I saw a documentary on how ships are kept together. _____!

I needed a password eight characters long so I picked _____.

To finish these puns, you need to figure out the alternative meanings that are being used. The first pun links together the phrase "how ships are kept together" with a word for excitement.

The password pun can be solved by realizing that "character" can also mean "person in a movie/show/etc." So all you need to do is find a single answer. The correct punchline will link the setup and punchline together so that "8 characters" are on the left side and "8 characters" is on the right.

Standing in the park, I was wondering why a Frisbee gets larger the closer it gets. Then _____.

Here you have a setup that creates curiosity in the audience. The punchline in this joke needs to create a link between "a frisbee getting closer and closer" and "wondering about something."

I went to buy some camouflage pants the other day but I _____.

The puns below are slightly more difficult. This one has 2 steps. The first step is the same as above: figure out what links the setup and punchline. The second step is figuring out how to structure the punchline to create comedic conflict.

A doctor tells a woman she can no longer touch anything alcoholic. So she _____.

The punchline needs to account for all the information in the setup. A good punchline for this setup needs to use the word "alcoholic" in a new way. The safe interpretation inside the setup is an "alcoholic drink." But you can't simply put in "alcoholic person" into the blank. The correct answer will "suggest" an alcoholic person, but not say it explicitly. There are many possible punchlines for this setup, but all of the good punchlines will share the same "alcoholic person" suggestion.

PUNCH-TO-SETUP

These puns are slightly different in that they were most likely written punchline-first… only later did the comedian come back and write a setup.

My dad suggested I register for a donor card. He's a man after my own heart

I've decided to sell my Hoover… well, it was just collecting dust.

For these 2 jokes, it would be far easier to begin with the punchline and work backwards. Try finishing the joke below. You'll notice that you get to start with a fun phrase (like the one's above).

About a month before he died, my uncle _____. After that, he went down hill fast.

There are several possible answers that would make sense. You can also try rephrasing it as a question: "What did you uncle do that made him "go down hill fast.""

ANSWERS:

1. Riveting!

2. Snow White & The Seven Dwarves

3. it hit me

4. I couldn't find any

5. got a divorce

6. put greasy on his back

Summary: Puns

1. Puns are a type of linguistic comedic conflict. It uses double-meanings to create safety and violations.

2. Puns are generally so overused in street-jokes that they aren't very effective in stand-up. High quality puns can still get a laugh, but it has to give the audience something beyond what they get in common street-jokes.

Meta-Jokes

Meta-jokes are "Jokes about jokes." The humor comes from their ability to characterize popular jokes. Meta-jokes use "references" to create comedic conflict. The comedic conflict relies on the listener's ability to reference the type of joke being made fun of.

Here are two popular meta-jokes. Notice how the green text feels like it is setting up a common joke while the red text (violation) makes you realize that it's a meta-joke.

"An Englishman, a Scotsman, and an Irishman walk into a bar. The bartender says, "What is this, some kind of joke?"

Here's my personal favorite:

"How many people of a certain demographic group does it take to perform a specified task? A finite number: One to perform the task and the remainder to act in a manner stereotypical of the group in question."

In both of these examples you can see that the actual humor comes from the jokes ability to make fun of other jokes. We are all familiar with the jokes that these meta-jokes are making fun of. "Three people walk into a bar" and "How many _____ does it take to change a light bulb" jokes are very popular in our culture. Meta-jokes are great at highlighting the absurdity of these types of jokes.

The safety comes from what we understand to be a "normal setup to a popular joke." When I say "How many lawyers does it take to change a lightbulb?" You know exactly what I'm doing… I'm setting up a joke. That creates the expectation that I will finish the joke the same way you've heard it finished before. The violation comes when you hear that the punchline is actually making fun of the style of joke that I'm telling you instead of what you expected.

Comedians like Steve Martin and Albert Brooks made meta-comedy famous in stand-up. Both comedians became what you could call "Meta-Comedians." Their stage persona was basically comedy 'about' comedians. They made fun of comedians in the same way that meta-jokes make fun of jokes. They made fun of who comedians are by poking their finger in the eye of the comedian's persona.

Summary: Meta-Jokes

1. Meta jokes are "Jokes about jokes"

2. Create an expectation of a "normal finish to a joke." That expectation is broken when the punchline makes fun of the joke itself.

3. Meta-jokes were popularized by Steve Martin and Albert Brooks. Both were known as "anti-comedians"

Callback Lines

A callback line is a line that you used earlier on in your set that you can reuse for another bit. These lines "call back" to an earlier punchline or reference.

Like meta-jokes, callback lines use references to create comedic conflict. Whereas a meta-joke references a joke-style that's being made fun of, a callback line references something the comedian said earlier in the show (or even something that happened before the comedian took the stage).

It creates comedic conflict by "repurposing" what was already said. The safety comes from the original context or meaning of the sentence while the violation comes from the new context or meaning.

What makes callbacks so powerful is their ability to be extremely short and concise while still drawing up an entire idea. They can do this because the entire idea was fleshed out earlier on in the set. Just by bringing up a small phrase from an older punch line is sufficient to bring the entire idea behind that joke (including the setup) into the present.

The second reason they're powerful is because they provide a sense of community with your audience. A callback is basically an "Inside-joke." In order to get the joke you must share some common experience with each

other, and that common experience is the original line you're calling back to. If you had walked in after the original punch line and heard the callback line later on in the show, you'd be very confused as to why the audience was laughing so hard at the line. Nothing about it would seem special to you. But you can tell you missed something important because everyone else in the audience had a completely different reaction. The audience members that are in on the joke have formed a community. Now, instead of listening to 'a comedian' they feel like they're a part of something. It's like that joke was just for them.

There are several important characteristics of callbacks that you need to know in order to use them effectively.

The first is that the audience needs to forget about the line. If you are simply calling back to what happened only a moment ago in your set, you'll lose the majority of its power. The power isn't coming from the actual line, but from the surprise that the line is being reused and the context that you are using the line. If you use a callback too early, the context will be almost identical to the original line. There will be nothing 'special' about it. And since the line was used only a few moments ago, the audience won't be surprised by it either. It will seem more like an echo than a separate idea.

However, if the line is used much later in the set (say 10 minutes) then the audience would have completely forgot the line and the context would have

completely changed. You'll be on a new subject. This provides the audience with the surprise and the change in context that makes the tag line powerful. It should go without saying that the callback should make sense when you use it. The context will change, but the line needs to fit in to your new subject.

Also, you'll find that callbacks are much more useful during longer sets. If you are on stage for only five minutes, you can still use a callback, but you can't have a long enough interval between the original line and the callback to maximize effectiveness. You'll have to wait until later in your career to get the full benefits. I still recommend using them even during shorter sets. Not only will you get some benefit out of it, but you'll also learn how to use them comfortably. By the time you get to the point in your career where you're performing longer sets, you'll be an expert at using this technique.

If you've spent time watching comedy, you might have noticed that a lot of comedians like to end their sets on a callback. While this is definitely not necessary, doing this brings your comedy full circle and gives it an enjoyable ending.

One of the best ways to learn how to use callback lines is to watch any Eddie Izzard DVD. His DVDs are often well over an hour long and contain numerous callbacks throughout his set. You'll also notice from Izzard that his callbacks aren't always entire punch lines. One of Izzard's best

callbacks in Dressed To Kill is simply the word "Ciao" (chow) spoken in an Italian accent.

Summary: Callbacks

1. A callback line references information the comedian used earlier.

2. Callback lines create an "inside joke with the audience."

3. Great callbacks put a new spin on old information

4. A callback line is a great way of ending a show

Omitted Punchline

An omitted punchline is when the comedian intentionally leaves out the last word(s) of a punchline so that the audience can fill in the rest.

For it to work effectively, **you MUST give the audience enough information to fill in the punchline** the way you want it filled in. In the examples below, notice how easy it is to fill in the blank.

Most omitted punchlines **substitute a gesture for the missing words**. This makes it quicker for the audience to recognize the punchline. (NOTE: Conventional punchlines often use voice inflection to signal a punchline)

This type of punchline is **a fun way of boosting the playfulness of your material**. They don't actually create any comedic conflict themselves, but they do change the comedic conflict by making your punchline more playful. That playfulness **can make a punchline feel safer** (increase the safety circle of your comedic conflict) and even **boost the quality of the laugh**.

Notice how playful and safe this omitted punchline feels:

Eddie Izzard: The Rules of Advertising – Sex Sells

Shagging sells everything!

That's it, there's an advert for coffee-

You come around, "Cup of coffee?"

"Ooh, let's shag!"

Yes! Adverts for chocolate bars,

two bits of chocolate bar,

one eats one, one eats the other,

"Oh, let's have a shag!"

That stuff for cleaning the floor,

clean the floor clean,

and then you shag on the floor…

Dog food, dog eats dog food…

… … … anyway…

So… not sure what happens there…

JARED: WALMART

Sometimes you can get the best laugh by omitting the punch line. If you've seen my Great American Comedy Festival video, you saw me use this tactic:

> *"I applied to Wal-Mart and they finally hired me. Which was great, cause if you get turned down by Wal-Mart… …"*

This was enough for a solid laugh. Instead of continuing the sentence, I trail off. After the first wave of laughter I hit a tagline:

- "I applied to Wal-Mart and they finally hired me.
- Which was great, cause if you get turned down by Wal-Mart… …"
- The game is OVER…
- You can no longer benefit society.

By using an omitted punchline here, I can **make the overall idea of the joke more playful**. It'd be too much of a violation for me to say "If you're turned down by Wal-Mart then you're too dumb to be useful to society."

The pause also lets me **use gestures and facial expressions** to let the audience know my opinion. The gestures could be be described as a small amount of sadness or hopelessness. When performing the joke, I always

try to get the audience to see I'm being empathetic. That makes me come off as playful and safe even though I'm saying something pretty tragic.

JOHN CAPARULO: GOLF COURSE

Let's look at another example of omitting the punchline. This example comes from comedian John Caparulo while he's talking about being attacked by a swan on a golf course:

> *"And I didn't want to run from the goose cause …*
>
> *[shrugs shoulders] … (laughter)*
>
> *that would look freakin' stupid."*

In this example, Caparulo lets the audience fill in what he's about to say using an extended pause as his punch line and following up with a tag line (which would have acted as the punch line if there were no pause). Instead of running together the two sentences, he places a break in between them and lets the audience fill in the rest.

But Caparulo didn't just let the audience think of 'anything,' he gave clues using gestures and voice inflection to lead all the audience members to the same conclusion. Caparulo's gestures and voice inflections all pointed to how bizarre and pathetic it would look to be running away from a swan. If this line was spoken in a monotone voice the audience might have mistaken his pause as him trying to find the next words. But since he was

using his voice inflection to lead them, the entire audience knew exactly where he was going. By omitting the punch line, Caparulo empowered the audience to fill in the rest.

This tactic works well because **a pause conveys an idea in itself**. A pause is much more than the absence of speaking. In a sense, the audience sees that the comedian as speechless; he is unable to explain everything that is going through his head. In Caparulo's case, the idea that being chased by a swan would look ridiculous isn't as funny as the idea that the comedian can't even come up with words to express the idea.

Another great feature of the pause is that **it lets the audience participate** in your comedy. Instead of the audience being 'told' what to think, the comedian is allowing them to put the pieces together for themselves. The audience is no longer just a 'listener' but an active participant, taking all the clues that were given (words, vocal inflections, gestures, context, etc.) and putting them together to arrive at a conclusion (the punch line).

Summary: Omitted Punchlines

1. You **MUST give the audience enough information** to fill in the missing punchline themselves. For it to work, the audience must know EXACTLY what you want them to do.

2. They **can make violations feel a little safer**. (YOU aren't the one who filled in the dirty word… THEY did.) Recall Izzard's "Advertising Dog Food" joke)

3. omitted punchlines **allow the audience to participate** in the humor

Specificity

Specificity enhances storytelling in much the same way that exaggeration does. Specificity doesn't actually create comedic conflict, but it does make your punchlines more fun and playful. By trading a 'general idea' for a specific idea we get a clearer (and more entertaining) picture of the story or punchline. Take this Ron White example (**Ron White: Hurricane Video**):

> *"Let me make something clear. It's not THAT the wind is blowin'… it's WHAT, the wind is blowing… if you get hit by a Volvo… it doesn't matter how many sit-ups you did that night."*

You can tell from reading this line that the word "Volvo" is what makes the joke funny. But the comedic conflict is deeper. The joke has nothing to do with Volvos… You can replace Volvo with another car type and it'd probably work the same. The purpose of saying Volvo is 2-fold:

First, the specificity **gives all audience members the same mental picture**. If you were to say "Automobile" then there would be many different interpretations by the audience. Some audience members would have the mental image of a Mac Truck (Which would have been an over-exaggeration); some would think about an RV, others would think about their station-wagon.

Second, choosing Volvo added a **new layer** to the joke. If you have to decide which specific object to choose, choose one that adds flavor to the joke. Volvos are known to be the safest cars in America. This **irony** makes the joke even better. Not only is he hit by a car… he's hit by THE SAFEST car.

HINT: Brand names are great for specificity because A) the audience all has the same knowledge about them and B) brand names try to be known for something (Volvo = safety). This information can be used to add more humor to a punchline.

How to Write Specificity

Like many of our examples here, start with something pre-written, like a sentence or short story about an experience.

1. **Write** out a few sentences of a story or look over anything you have already written.
2. Look for any **nouns that are too general** (i.e., "a car" "a computer")
3. **Choose a general noun** you want to change
4. **List different specific nouns** that would work for your joke. (A car could be Toyota, Honda, Volvo, etc.)
5. **Decide which specific noun** provides the most comedic conflict ("the second layer")
6. **Replace** the general noun with the specific one

Bonus Lesson: Self-Depreciation

[John Caparulo Example Video](#)

Here are some setup/punchlines combinations to practice with:

1. I could tell my **parents hated me**, my **bath toys** were a _____ and a _____.

2. I have a lot of **growing up** to do. I realized that the other day while I was _____.

3. My wife told me: '**Sex is better on holiday**.' That wasn't a nice thing to say when _____.

4. My dad said, always **leave them wanting more**. Ironically, that's how he _____.

5. My **girlfriend** is always **stealing my t-shirts and sweaters**… But if I _____, suddenly "we have to talk."

6. To this day, the boy that used to bully me at school still **takes my lunch money**. On the plus side, he _____.

ANSWERS

1. In number 1, the punchline needs to link **"parents hated me" with "bath toys."** Turn this into a question "What would parents put in a bathtub with their children if they hated them?" Anything dangerous works here, as long as there's still enough safety for the audience.

2. Punchline 2 simply needs to be a place or activity that is very childish. There are many possible answers.

3. You probably have a good idea about the direction of punchline 3. The punchline clearly doesn't involve the guy having sex. To complete this punchline, you simply need to find a way of hinting that the wife is cheating without using too much violation.

4. Punchline 4 simply requires finding an activity/job/etc that would be in conflict with the the phrase "always leave them wanting more."

5. Punchline 5 requires a little more effort. The goal is to write an "If X, then Y" punchline. "Y" has too be something bad or the joke wouldn't make sense. Let's substitute Y for a simple phrase like "She gets really mad." The best punchline is going to play off of the idea "she borrows my clothes" while also leading to a bad outcome. (i.e., dress, jeans, etc.)

6. Punchline 6 needs to account for the phrase "still takes my lunch money." Unlike the other jokes, this joke begins with a violation in the setup and creates safety in the punchline. A good punchline is going to "put the bully in his place." This can be done by using any demeaning job at a restaurant that offers lunch.