

Comedy (seriously.)

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What makes something funny?

Science offers plenty of conflicting definitions riddled with \$100 words, and a situation one person finds hysterical may seem boring or even irritating to another. What makes something funny is tough to pin down, because we all react differently to the same situations. Simply put, humor is your brain telling you, “I didn’t see that coming, and I liked it!” While laughter and delight may not be the responses you intend your writing to create, forging an emotional connection with your readers is something all writers crave. By learning how comedy writers elicit this reaction in their fans, writers of any tone or genre can connect to their readers more effectively.

Keep it relatable, but point out the absurdity of the ordinary

This is a standard tactic of stand up comedians. They start with a situation everyone can relate to, like waiting in a long line or having to wake up early for work. Then, they work on that sense of solidarity to show how this common scenario is actually a bit ridiculous: Everyone loves cats! The pet that hides and ignores you, then knocks things off your counters when you’re not looking is an ideal companion!

While the subject matter of your writing may not always be a relatable situation, like living on a spaceship or battling a dystopian dictator, there are always elements that readers will forge an emotional connection with, like starting a new job and not being sure you'll fit in; the fact that the job is on a spaceship becomes secondary. Fostering this sense of commonality can make your protagonist a kind of surrogate for the reader, so that they will care about what happens to the character and be emotionally invested in the story's outcome.

Unexpected

A lot of humor derives from thinking you understand a situation, and then the punch line throws something unexpected at you. For example: There are two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and says, "I don't know how to drive this thing, let alone fire it!" You start out thinking "tank" refers to a fishbowl, but halfway through—surprise! It's a military tank.

While you do want to create a sense of commonality with your readers, you definitely don't want to take that so far that the plot is predictable. Incorporate the unexpected by defying tropes and stereotypes, reworking cliches and common metaphors, and using plot twists to keep your characters from achieving their goals too easily.

Each chapter should begin with something that immediately draws interest, or creates questions in the reader's mind. The opening line of your story, especially, should carry enough weight to be the tagline on a movie poster. Browse your own bookshelf and focus just on the opening sentence of each one; you'll find the most successful either introduce an unexpected scenario, or invite questions that make you want to read more.

EXAMPLES:

- "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."
(George Orwell, 1984)
- "This is my favorite book in all the world, though I have never read it."
(William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*)
- "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much." (J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*)
- "All this happened, more or less." (Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*)

Similarly, chapter endings need special attention. Chapter breaks can come at the conclusion of a scene, or in the middle of one, but should always entice the reader to move on to the next chapter. Ending with a joke, cliffhanger, foreshadowing, plot twist, or similar

emotionally-charged literary device will make your story "un-put-down-able".

Slightly “wrong”

Some types of humor encourage you to laugh when you know you shouldn't: at someone smashing their thumb with a hammer, for example, or dark but inoffensive subject matter. Consider this quote by satirist Austin Gilkeson: "...judging by the sloppy handwriting, whoever wrote them was almost certainly drunk, a child, or both." Its humor derives from the “wrongness” of the idea of a child being drunk. (<https://the-toast.net/2014/12/08/defeated-tolkien-estate/>)

You definitely don't want to take things far enough to cause real offense, which risks alienating your readers. However, any time the little voice in the back of your mind says, “Well you can't write *that!*”, take a moment to reconsider. Self-censoring is the surest way to kill off your authentic writer's voice.

Specificity and Hyperbole

Which is funnier—having a large mouse invading your kitchen? A mouse the size of a dog? Or a mouse the size of a Labrador? Unless your writing is speculative, your readers are going to understand the mouse doesn't *actually* weigh sixty pounds or more, but the exaggeration of comparing a rodent to a retriever *seems* true when you find the creature digging through your cereal box. The specificity of "Labrador" is both more descriptive and more absurd than just "dog". Any time you use adjectives or similes in your writing, come back in the editing phase and see if substituting a more specific form of that word could give the sentence a bit more punch.

Rhythm and Pace

Comedy has a rhythm to it, much like music, as explained by cartoonist Stephan Pastis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3XzWzBr5eg>

Incorporate this principle into your writing by varying the length of sentences and paragraphs, choosing poetry meter carefully, and using strategic line breaks and punctuation. When you edit, read your work out loud rather than reading silently, to get a feel for the flow of the words, and adjust as necessary.