Humor 101

There’s more to humor than slapstick silliness and joke telling.

Is that joke fresh and new enough to make ‘em laugh? How do you know it won’t offend or bore your audience? And if your best joke makes people yawn, how do you keep your chin up and your clown nose on?

Perhaps you’ve had a bad joke-telling experience – the audience sighed while your joke died – and you’d just as soon remain serious the rest of your life. In an article for the Toastmaster magazine, Dave Zielinski writes that you should shake off that fear. Humor’s ability to poison a presentation is exceeded only by its capacity to lift it to another level.

The magic of mirth
Well-executed humor holds the power to deliver messages in an entertaining fashion and can jolt us into seeing things from a broader perspective. It can enliven dull topics, diffuse tense situations and help the speaker connect with the audience.

Bring out your “Kitchen Person”
Many professionals force themselves into the button-down and deadly serious mold – very different from the person they are at home. But most people would rather hear the wit and warmth of that relaxed person. Noted speechwriter Peggy Noonan says, “Humor is gracious and shows respect. It shows the audience you think enough of them to want to entertain them.”

The joke is on jokes
There’s no sin in being mildly amusing instead of eye-dabblingly funny, particularly if humor is connected to your message. Of course, you should use your judgment to avoid upsetting or offending the wrong people. Relate some gentle humor to the situation at hand, and you’ll probably be right on target. Just remember, there’s more to humor than slapstick silliness and joke telling.

What’s a sorry joke-teller to do?
The safest jokes you can tell are about yourself. Self-effacing humor is least likely to offend others, and also finding humor in your own life will make it fresh and appropriate to the audience. It’s important to keep track of funny things that happen in your own life, especially those that relate to the messages of your speeches. But be sure that your stories are truly your own – never pretend that someone else’s story happened to you. Someone in the audience will know you’re not being honest.

Fixing the failing funny gene
Even if you feel that you don’t have a funny bone in your body, there is hope. Start small. Add a funny line or two to memos and work your way up to sharing short stories over the cubicle wall. Once people begin to see that you do have a humorous side, you can expand your repertoire until you’re adding funny quotes to your presentations. Look
for opportunities to exercise spontaneous wit and show off your lighthearted talents. You may find that taking a class in improvisational theater will help arm you for such opportunities. Keep this up and before you know it, you’ll be adding humor to your speaking arsenal and you’ll become one of the outstanding presenters in your business.

From an article in the Toastmaster by Dave Zielinski.

Read The Complete PDF Article
Meet Jones. He’s giving a progress report on the new project he’s managing and, since he wants to add some levity to his presentation, he starts off with a great new joke that landed in his e-mail box last week. But Jones doesn’t realize that his “new” joke has in fact been circulating on the Internet for at least six months. Worse yet, if he’s put any rehearsal time into the joke, it doesn’t show in his delivery.

No one laughs. Jones begins to stammer and look nervously around the room. Somehow he salvages the presentation, but it’s uphill all the way. Inwardly he vows: I’ll never use a joke again.

Risky Business?
If you’ve ever had a Jones-like experience, finding more ways to inject humor into your presentations probably isn’t high on your list. To your way of thinking, the risk of bombing far outweighs any gains or goodwill that might come from generating a few laughs. Perhaps you’re among those who believe – or work in an organizational culture that propagates the belief – that work is work, fun is fun, and never the twain shall meet. Or maybe you’ve been told all your life that you’re not a funny person, so to prove it, you wear your “I am a serious executive” persona whenever you step in front of an audience.
But if, as a speaker, you find yourself avoiding humor out of fear of failing, you may be overlooking one of the most powerful weapons available to you — and, possibly, undermining the effectiveness of every presentation you give. That’s because humor’s ability to poison a presentation is exceeded only by its capacity to lift it to another level.

The Magic of Mirth
Elusive as it may be, well-executed humor holds the power to deliver messages in an entertaining (and therefore memorable) fashion. Used intelligently, it can jolt us into seeing things from a broader perspective, enliven dull topics, diffuse tense situations and help speakers make a more human connection with their audiences.

Psychologists have long noted that when an audience laughs with you, chances are they’ll also be for you. After a laugh, people are more receptive to the message that immediately follows it, even if it’s something they don’t want to hear. And, let’s face it: With the inherent pressures and deadly earnestness in much of today’s workplace, there’s hardly a problem with too much laughter or merry-making in the corporate work setting.

Bring Out Your “Kitchen Person”
“So many managers we see are button-down and deadly serious — and so unlike the person they are in the kitchen at home, chatting with their friends,” says Cherie Kerr. The founder and CEO of ExecuProv in Santa Ana, California, Kerr teaches improvisational-comedy techniques to executives, showing them how to build more humor into presentations.

“The reality is, we’d rather be in the company of that ‘kitchen person’ than the guarded, inhibited one in the business setting,” Kerr continues. “Too many presenters think showing their funny or witty side isn’t acceptable in the business world. But when they show that side of themselves, everyone embraces them.”

In her book Simply Speaking: How to Communicate Your Ideas With Style, Substance, and Clarity (Regan Books, 1998), noted speechwriter Peggy Noonan says humor also serves another key purpose: “Humor is gracious and shows respect. It shows the audience you think enough of them to want to entertain them.”

The Joke Is On Jokes
One of the biggest stumbling blocks to using humor effectively is that too many presenters still equate humor with joke-telling, flashing “Dilbert” cartoons or using wacky props on the podium. Speakers also tend to mistakenly think they must generate the rolling belly laughs of Robin Williams or Chris Rock for their humor to succeed. But there’s no sin in being mildly amusing instead of eye-dabbingly funny, particularly if your humor is intimately connected to your message.

One problem, say many humor experts, is that delivering a good joke is never as easy as it appears. The joke must be funny in itself, get a great delivery, and fit the audience and situation. That’s a difficult trifecta for most amateur presenters to pull off.

“Think about the jokes you receive from friends by e-mail,” says Paul Reali of CyberSkills Computer Training Centers in Greensboro, North Carolina, who discourages trainers on his staff from telling jokes. “Even when you get a really good one, you don’t forward it to everyone on your list. Instead, you select only those people who can appreciate it, wouldn’t be offended by it and who wouldn’t judge you badly because you liked it.”

What’s a Sorry Joke-Teller to Do?
So if joke telling should be kept to a minimum, what can you do to add humor to a lackluster presentation? Plenty, say the experts. The truth is, there is a world of humor opportunity out there besides slapstick silliness and joke telling. In most cases, any appropriate humor you use will be favorably received by an audience — as long it doesn’t look too canned, and provided you get your point across.

“You audience would rather hear about the time you fell on your face than when you won the race.”

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way to go, says Tom Antion, a Washington, D.C.-based presentation skills and humor consultant who himself has delivered more than 2,000 presentations. Being willing to tease yourself creates strong rapport with most audiences, he says.

“We’ve all had problems, and telling funny stories on yourself creates an impression that you’re secure, confident and likable,” Antion says. “Weak people feel the need to inflate themselves; confident people don’t. Your audience would rather hear about the time you fell on your face than when you won the race.”

But don’t pour it on too thick, he cautions – a little self-effacing humor goes a long way.

**You Are Your Own Material**

Where can you find good material if you don’t like jokes, if you think most props are sophomoric, and if you can’t for the life of you find a funny quote or cartoon to fit your content? Your life is the mother lode.

Humorist Jeanne Robertson has been turning her own life experiences into humorous presentations to corporations and associations for more than 30 years. She first discovered that personal tales held more power than joke-telling during a reign as Miss North Carolina, when she’d tell stories about drinking from a finger bowl at a formal banquet and being shot by kids with peashooters during a small-town parade.

Good jokes get passed around and worn out, Robertson says – speedier than ever now, owing to the Internet. Personal stories, on the other hand, are uniquely yours. Mining them also diminishes the chances an audience has already heard your material – and your supply is continually refreshed.

Robertson estimates that 95 percent of the humorous material she uses in her 100-plus presentations a year is drawn from her own life experiences or from those around her. She’s constantly probing friends, family, co-workers and even perfect strangers for new material – what she calls her “Big Bag” philosophy, the discipline of continually filling a metaphorical bag with new material. Robertson keeps a journal so that when potentially humorous situations happen, she can immediately write them down to refine and use later – relying on complete sentences and paragraphs, she says, not just disconnected thoughts on scraps of paper.

Robertson does have a word of caution, though: Never pretend someone else’s story happened to you, even if you’re speaking in a remote village in Greenland. If it’s a good enough story, it’ll make the rounds, and it’s not worth the risk of making a false claim in front of someone who heard it told differently elsewhere – or, worse, was part of the original story.

**Mixing the Message and the Medium**

Although using humor for humor’s sake has its advantages, your comedy will pack far more punch if it’s tied directly to your content, or if it has a strong learning hook. “An audience will forgive you if your humor isn’t all that funny, but is connected to your message,” says Tom Antion. “If it’s funny, so much the better. But if it isn’t, at least you made your point.”

Brian McDermott, a senior consultant with Minneapolis-based GrowthWorks Inc., ties his use of humor closely to his company’s themes of innovation and creativity training, noting that humor has long been linked with enhanced creativity, on the job and elsewhere. Good humorists, he says, lead listeners down a linear path, then throw in something unexpected. “It’s that leap to the side, the stride off the beaten path that makes us laugh, and also is a key to innovation and creativity,” he says.

A favorite such McDermott story: Ted Turner, Jack Welch and Bill Gates all die on the same day and arrive at the Pearly Gates. God asks each to answer one question – *What do you truly believe in?* – before they can be granted entry. Ted Turner says: “I believe in speed and accuracy. Give people what they need quickly and reliably, and you’ll be successful.” Great, says God; come in and sit at my left hand. Jack Welch says: “I believe in product quality and being No. 1 or No. 2 in your marketplace. That will make you successful and an asset to society.” Wonderful, says God; come on in. Then Bill Gates steps up. “What do you believe in?” asks God. Gates says: “I believe you’re sitting in my chair.”

**What If I’m Missing the Funny Gene?**

The humorless do walk among us, of course. While some of us simply were born without the humor gene, more have had it drummed out of us by family beliefs, by bad experiences with early attempts at humor, or by corporate cultures that allow little leeway for lightheartedness amid the serious business of work.

Yet we know that many of the humor-impaired yearn to let their sense of fun out of the bag, even if they’re presenting only a few times a year. So where do these walking wounded start? By laying the groundwork, brick by brick, even if it means tooling along on training wheels for a while.

“Someone who’s known as staunch or stoic on the job can’t just suddenly get up there and start attempting humor, especially if the audience knows them,” Antion says. “That’s a big disconnect.” Better to start getting your humor chops on the job, he says, and let that bleed over into presentation scenarios. Try a funny line or two in a memo you’re writing: pass around a funny story sent to you via e-mail; work your way up to telling a brief story over the cubicle wall about something that happened to you. Your colleagues need to perceive your humorous side before they can embrace it when you present.

Once the groundwork is laid, you can move on to presentation content. Start slow with slides of funny quotes, cartoons or other props that speak for themselves and help take the pressure off you – things that say it better than you ever could.

“People often will remember a funny quote longer than other parts of your presentation,” Cherie Kerr says.
“I remember listening once to a long speech, little of which I recall today, except the speaker saying at the end, ‘And, to quote Lily Tomlin, remember that we’re all in this alone.’ It was funny, but it also drove home the point she was trying to make.”

**A Spirit of Spontaneity**

Timed correctly, a humorous comment or offhand observation can be the icebreaker that makes everything else in your presentation fall into place. Leslie Brunker, a Portland, Oregon-based consultant who helps trainers extract more humor from their sessions, promotes a concept she calls “humor aikido” to help turn negative situations into positive ones.

In the martial art aikido, students are taught to use their opponent’s energy – what’s moving at them or against them – to their own advantage. “Instead of resisting, you use the energy flow to disarm your opponent,” Brunker says. If you’re leading a training session with mandated attendance, for instance, and employees are showing obvious resistance to being there, “play off that resistance with humor,” she says. “Maybe talk about your own resistance as a trainer to having to teach the session, and create more of a light, we’re-all-in-this-together moment.”

Brunker encourages business presenters and trainers to move away from humor-by-formula (“show a cartoon every 30 minutes; tell one joke in each curriculum module”). Instead, she says, you should work toward creating a light mood that encourages spontaneity and enhanced learning through mirth-making.

“Fun and play are not always what we make happen, but what we allow to happen,” Brunker says. “We encourage that through invoking a playful spirit in the classroom, and spontaneously taking advantage of moments that arise during a session. It’s more about drawing humor out of situations than putting it in. I don’t think joke telling, for instance, connects you with an audience the way a light spirit can.”

**Improvisational Training**

Recognizing that an arsenal of jokes is not enough to ensure a successful or lively presentation, some companies are turning to improvisational-comedy training as a way to help presenters become more expressive and “in the moment” onstage. Many are also finding that such training also improves other parts of an executive’s performance.

Ritch Davidson is among those who teach improvisational techniques to corporate America. The “senior vice emperor” of Playfair Inc., an international consulting company that stresses the value of humor and fun in building creativity and productivity on the job, Davidson believes improv’s biggest benefit is the way it teaches businesspeople to be less judgmental and more collaborative. One fundamental of the improv technique is called the “yes/and” adjustment. In essence, he says, it means keeping an open mind to new ideas.

“How many times have you been in a meeting where someone brings up a new idea, and people immediately say why it won’t work?” Davidson asks. Instead of saying “Yes, but” to a new idea – essentially making it DOA – improvisation teaches players to say “Yes, and.” This gives new suggestions a chance to breathe, allowing teammates to build on them and possibly improve them.

Much of Playfair’s approach is supported by research, Davidson says, in particular the work of David Abramis at California State University at Long Beach. In his studies, Abramis has found that people who use humor and are playful on the job are more creative and productive, get along better with co-workers, are better decision-makers and have a lower rate of absenteeism and sick days.

They also make outstanding presenters. And that’s no joke.

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Laugh With and Learn From The Comics

How to have fun on stage.

Public speakers have much to learn from the experiences of comics. In this article, Gene Perret provides a number of helpful speaking tips from the world of the stand-up comedian, including the following recommendations:

- Own The Stage
- Know What You Are Going To Say
- Respect Your Audience
- Build Up To Your Message
- Wait For Your Laughs
- Don’t Let Them See You Sweat
- Learn From Others
- Don’t Take Yourself Too Seriously
- Speak The Truth
- Have Fun

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I once I asked Jay Leno what advice be had for people who wanted to become standup comics. He said, “First, learn to speak in public.” It seems logical that if learning to be a good speaker can help you become a professional comedian, then listening to and learning from professional comics can be beneficial for one’s speaking.
Here are a few lessons we speakers can learn from the laugh-makers:

**Own The Stage**
I've been backstage with Bob Hope when he was weary. He would sit slumped in his chair eager for the evening's entertainment to end. Yet when his theme music played and the emcee began his introduction, Bob Hope would stand tall and march onto the stage with determination.

All the great entertainers do more than simply make an entrance; they commandeer the stage. They let the audience know immediately who is in charge, who will be orchestrating the evening’s excitement.

The same should be true for a speaker. When you are brought to the podium, capture it and the listeners. Don’t relinquish your authority until it’s time for your “thank you” and “goodnight.”

**Know What You Are Going To Say**
A recurring dream – no, nightmare – I have (and you probably do too) is that I am called to the microphone to “say a few words.” When I get there, I can’t think of a thing to say. I stand there frozen.

I remember working with the legendary comic actress, Lucille Ball. I told her we were adding a small bit to the show we were doing. She said, “Fine, let me see the script.” I said, “It’s just an adlib bit. We won’t have a script.” She said, “I tried that once when I was a young actress and I died onstage. I want to see a script.” Lucy wanted to know what she was going to say. We got her a script.

Comedians know they need material. They know where the laughs are and how to get them. Speakers, too, should know their message and how to deliver it before they approach the lectern.

**Respect Your Audience**
A comedian’s formula is very simple – if I get laughs, I’m a success; if I don’t get laughs, I’m a flop. And each comedian knows where those laughs come from: They come from the people sitting out front.

I once heard a beginning comic being chastised by an old pro. The veteran said to the newcomer after a sub-par performance, “You quit out there tonight.” The neophyte said, “I had to. That was a bad audience.” The wily old-timer said, “No sir. When it’s a bad audience, you have to work harder.”

“All the great entertainers do more than simply make an entrance, they commandeer the stage.”
Good audiences are to be cherished and enjoyed, but all audiences are to be respected. A speaker owes all his or her listeners courtesy, consideration and the best darn performance you can offer. In other words, be professional.

**Build Up To Your Message**
A comedian’s message usually is the punch line. That which produces the laugh is sacred to a comic. It’s the entire purpose of the performance. Consequently, everything else in the presentation is there to promote, enhance and reinforce the punch line.

I know because I have worked into the early hours of the morning with some comics who insisted that this word be changed, or that phrase be replaced, or this sentence be relocated – do something, they would plead; do anything to make the joke stronger.

As a speaker, your message should be as sacred as the comic’s punch line. You should work as hard and as intelligently as you can to promote, enhance and reinforce your overriding theme.

**Wait For Your Laughs**
I have coached many beginning standup comics. Before I hear any of their material or see them step onto a stage, I offer one bit of advice that applies to and can benefit all of them – “speak slowly.” Young comics are usually nervous and want to get on stage and off as fast as possible. So they rush. If the act is going well, they get excited. So they rush. If the act is going badly, they want to escape. So they rush.

Polished comedy performers value the jokes they’re telling. They want the audience to hear every word, every nuance. So they take their time. They even pause at critical points in the presentation to build suspense. “Something wonderful is coming,” they seem to be telling the listeners, “but I’m going to make you wait just a little longer for it.”

When they do deliver the comic gem, they wait for the impact to sink in. They wait for their laughs.

You, the speaker, have something wonderful for your listeners, also. Don’t rush them through it. Let them savor it, wallow in it. Let them hear every delicious word and give them time to appreciate it.

**Don’t Let Them See You Sweat**
This admonition was popularized in TV commercials not too long ago. “No matter how badly you’re doing,” various comics advised, “don’t let them see you sweat.” I heard Bob Newhart talking about sub-standard performances one night. He admitted he had them. In fact, he said that any comic who said he never had an off night was not telling the truth.

I remember a lecture I delivered in a movie theater. I had been working to the crowd in the back of the hall and the balcony. It occurred to me I should pay some attention to the people in the first few rows. I glanced down and the entire front row was catching a nap.

Many comedians will tell you, almost fondly, of their disastrous shows. One thing they won’t tell you, though, is how they gave up on those shows. The pros don’t. As mentioned earlier, they work harder.

**Learn From Others**
Many years ago I went on tour with a comedian I was writing for, and I rarely saw his act. Each night he sent me to other clubs to see what other comedians were doing. It wasn’t that we would borrow material or anything like that. This comic just wanted to see what the others were doing, what worked, what the audiences did and didn’t appreciate.

All of us can learn from other speakers. We can pick up effective gestures that might work in our own speeches. We can learn from their dramatic pauses. We might see how they handle props and visuals. We might just become
better speakers by listening to and learning from better speakers.

**Don’t Take Yourself Too Seriously**

Good comics are not afraid to be the foil of their own gags. When writing dialogue for a particular comedian and his guest, I gave the comic (since he signed my checks) some really powerful lines. However, he revised the script. When the show was performed, all my funny lines were given to the guest. They got beautiful, giant, boffo laughs.

I asked the performer why he made those changes. He told me, “The audience always likes it when the guest star does clever put downs of the star.” He was not only willing to be the butt of his own jokes, but relished it. The laughs were bigger; the show was better.

As speakers we often have momentous messages that should be treated respectfully. But we should remember it’s the message that’s important; not us personally. If you can present a sense of humor about yourself, the audience will respect that. They’ll listen to your important message even more eagerly.

**Speak The Truth**

Early in my comedy writing career, I sent several gags to Phyllis Diller. I was especially proud of one in particular. However, Phyllis turned it down. I was so stunned that I had the audacity to ask her about it. I said, “Why did you turn that one joke down.” She said, “It wasn’t true, and honey, if it’s not true, don’t send it to me.”

Comics can exaggerate, distort, twist, bend, rearrange – do lots of things with facts. However, for a joke to be truly effective, the audience must recognize some truthful, realistic basis for it. It must have an honest foundation.

In my presentation, during questions and answers, someone will often ask if a certain anecdote is true. I tell the audience very frankly, “Everything I say in my talk is either true or would have been true if it had actually happened.”

Yes, I manipulate some facts in order to emphasize the humor, but it remains based in recognizable reality. As a speaker, you have a message you are delivering. It should be based on valid, honest, well-researched facts.

**Have Fun**

It sounds so simple, and it is. Comedians love to entertain. They enjoy the laughter and the applause. Once Bob Hope was going on a vacation to a remote part of Alaska. He was going to be gone for four weeks and would be away from phones. We writers couldn’t reach him and he couldn’t reach us. Frankly, I was looking forward to this vacation of my own.

After three days, he called me for material. I said, “Where are you?” He said, “I’m home.” I said, “I thought you were going fishing in Alaska for a few weeks?” He said, “I found out fish can’t applaud.”

Comedians have fun on stage. When they do, people have fun in the audience.

Enjoy your time on the podium, and the listeners will enjoy themselves, too. Luckily, laughter, enjoyment and happiness are contagious.

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Gene Perret has won several Emmys for his work on The Carol Burnett Show. He was Bob Hope’s head writer for the last 12 years of Hope’s life. His latest book, Damn! That’s Funny was published in 2005. Contact him at gper276@sbcglobal.net.
Humor to the Rescue

A witty response is good for business.

Humor is a wonderful tool. When you are skilled at using humor, it can rescue you from dire situations and turn negatives into positives. John Kinde, veteran Toastmaster, describes how humor saved him in his article, “Humor to the Rescue,” in the March 2006 Toastmaster magazine.

Kinde has survived all kinds of mistakes, such as forgetting clients’ names in important business meetings. He learned not to become defensive or come up with excuses. And he didn’t try to ignore a mistake. He readily admitted the error and had some fun with it. He discovered that laughter, in these cases, can truly be the best medicine.

For example, what does an e-zine editor do when it’s discovered that a glaring blunder has just been sent out to people in 60 countries – who all received blank magazines? That happened to Kinde, and his article describes that the best way out was humor. This humor expert turned his technical glitch into a “Blank Book Title” contest – a very successful moment of inspiration. Everyone loved the idea, and he received 350 submissions. Some of his favorites include:

- The Greatest Story Never Told
- Much Ado About Nothing
- The Sequel to The Last Word
- Gifts Greater Than Life

Be alert for humor opportunities and use them to further your career, safeguard you from mishaps, and make you a stronger leader and speaker. Sometimes, a joke is a genius’ stroke.

From an article in the Toastmaster magazine by John Kinde, DTM, AS

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How to Tell a Joke

Do it right, or leave it out.

By Larry Getlen

You’re at a party. Your friend’s sister’s cousin from Montana tells a joke about a talking flounder, a one-armed fisherman, and a Jesuit priest from Nantucket, and you haven’t laughed this hard since your Uncle Mel accidentally turned the Thanksgiving turkey into a stew. But your memory for jokes is not the best, as you learned that time you told your co-worker, “Take my wife...ummm...tonight?”

So, if you hear a joke you love, how do you ensure it stays in your memory?

Write it down

Excuse yourself, find a pen and jot it on a piece of paper. If you can’t find paper, use a napkin or a matchbook cover.

But if you can’t find a pen, pick up your cell phone and tell the joke to your voice mail. Not only can you write it down later, but this also gives you your first shot at telling the joke.

In fact, try to tell the joke to someone else in the next 24-48 hours, and do it more than once. If you wait several weeks to tell it, you may have forgotten the important points. Also, keep a “joke” file on your computer. Update it whenever you hear a joke you like, making sure to include the important words, phrases and punch line.

Hand out parts...in your head

If the joke is about three city guys trying to corral a herd of bison, what if you imagine your dad, your brother, and that nerdy guy Jim from your office as the three guys? I mean, dad trying to herd bison? He can’t change his oil without ruining a shirt! And Jim, the computer geek who once got his tie caught in the copy machine?

You get the point. The more you personalize the joke in your head, the more visual you make it for yourself, the easier it will be to recall at a later date.

Get to know the joke - rehearse

Repeating jokes out loud gets you used to the act of telling them and that’s what will make you remember them. Repetition is key in memorizing anything, and being comfortable with your jokes is key to being funny. So print out your joke file, stand in front of your favorite mirror and speak as if you’re talking to a good friend.

Repeating your jokes also helps you gauge their pace and their rhythm: where to pause, where to speed up and where to edit. One important tip – if you’re saying the joke out loud and you start to bore yourself, shorten the joke. Figure out what can be cut without killing the laugh. Remember: The shorter the joke, the easier it is to remember.

One last word on memorization and preparation: If you don’t have a joke sufficiently memorized so that you’re 100
To be sure you can tell it with confidence, hit every key piece of information and get the punch line exactly right –
don’t tell it. Period.

**How to do it wrong.**
So now here you are, at your nephew’s wedding. You hear laughter from the other side of the room, and it’s your
Uncle Jack, telling jokes to several of his fishing buddies and some ladies from the other side of the family. Here’s
your chance.

But before you wade in, let’s listen in on ole’ Uncle Jack:

“Alright, my turn, my turn. This joke is the funniest joke you’ve ever heard – you’re gonna die! Alright – so a priest, a
rabbi and an octopus are floating in a hot-air balloon over the Eiffel Tower. The three of them are starting to sink, and
they’re afraid they have too much weight to land safely. So the rabbi says to the octopus…hold on. So the priest says
to the rabbi…wait, I mean, the rabbi says to the octopus…yeah, that’s it. The rabbi says to the octopus…”

We’ll stop here; this is painful enough. Now, let’s examine the many mistakes dear Uncle Jack has already made –
mistakes you’ll want to avoid any time you’re telling a joke:

**Don’t tell racially sensitive jokes.** There is a difference between jokes involving race, and racist jokes. However,
everyone has a different barometer for this, and what may seem harmless to you may offend someone else. Unless
you’re absolutely sure that you know the sensibilities of the people involved, err on the side of caution and keep race
and religion out of it.

The same goes, by the way, for sexual material and profanity. Unless you know your listeners well enough to know
they’re cool with it, leave it out.

**Never start off by telling your audience how funny the joke is.** There’s no upside to it. Just tell the joke, and let
the listeners judge. Comedians don’t come out on stage and tell the audience how funny they are, and neither should
you.

**Make sure you have the joke memorized, and in order.** Once you have to double back and inter-rupt your
momentum to give the audience information you forgot to give them in the first place, the joke’s dead.

This is most important. If you’re gonna tell a joke about an octopus, don’t put him in a hot-air balloon. Everyone
knows octopi are afraid of heights.

So Uncle Jack gets through the horrible octopus joke and before anyone else can speak, he says, “Wait – I’ve got
one more.” Everyone in ear-shot fidgets. No one looks him in the eye. Several people glance at their watches. But
before anyone can make a graceful exit, he launches into another one. And since he’s such a good example of what
not to do, let’s stick with him for a minute:

**Doing it wrong – the sequel**
“So there’s this Frenchman, Jacques,” says Uncle Jack, who then starts speaking in what is supposed to be a French
accent, but sounds more like he’s gargling with glass. “Jacques tells his friend Pierre, ‘Eye em in zee kitcheeen,
waiting for deees-ert.” Suddenly and inexplicably, Uncle Jack sounds Southern. He has also scrunched up his face
in what he thinks is a snobby French pose, but really looks like he has something in his eye. So, let’s learn from his
mistakes.

**Don’t do an accent unless you know you can do it perfectly** – which means keeping the exact same accent from
the beginning of the joke to the end. When telling jokes, close enough is not good enough. Do it right, or leave it out.

Unless you graduated from mime school, leave the funny faces and voices at home. Like the accent, if your
antics are not perfect, they’ll merely call attention to how imperfect they are, and detract from the joke.

Do not – under any circumstances except for maybe a fire – interrupt your own joke in the middle. Jokes
require timing and momentum. If you stop your own joke in the middle, you’ve killed your own momentum.

Almost ready…
So, now you know how to memorize and prepare your joke, and what awful habits to avoid. Anything else to keep in
mind before slaying your crowd with your blazing wit?

Sure – here are a few additional pointers:
If something out of your control interrupts you in mid-joke, take a minute to see what happens. The momentum is probably dead, but if your listeners return their attention to you hoping to hear the rest, pick up where you left off. Do not make a big deal about the interruption. What if they don’t return their attention to you? Cut your losses and move on.

Don’t rush the joke. Speak at a reasonable pace – not so slowly that you bore the crowd, but not so fast that important words get garbled. Pace and coherence are very important in the joke – make sure you have both.

Make eye contact with the people you’re telling the joke to, and distribute it evenly. This involves each person as if you’re talking directly to them, but be sure to alter your eye contact so as not to focus on any one person.

Don’t laugh at your own joke. Your own laughter can break your momentum as much as any other interruption.

Most importantly – commit to the joke. Believe in the joke and in your ability to tell it in a funny way.

Of course, if you’ve followed the advice in this article and put your best foot forward, then you’re on your way to becoming the hit of any gathering, party or speaking engagement.

Excerpted from The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Jokes.

Larry Getlen is the author of The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Jokes.
Mastering the Laugh

You won't croak if you tell a joke!

Let’s face it. Humor is hard! Even experienced speakers struggle with knowing how to (appropriately!) tickle their audience’s funny bones. We all enjoy listening to a funny speech –the problem is, we typically don’t think of ourselves as being funny speakers. Members of Toastmasters are no different; that’s why we have assembled a wide range of resource material on this topic. Toastmasters exist to help your audience laugh with you, not at you!

Humor has many benefits. It can:

- Help establish a bond with the audience
- Win over a hostile audience
- Keep the audience interested
- Emphasize or illustrate a point
- Help people remember you

Here are some tips:

- **Be yourself.** Think about what types of humor you appreciate, then create a library of such items. Don’t like jokes? Try a humorous anecdote or a witty observation from your own life.
- **It’s OK to be mildly amusing, rather than eye-dabblingly funny.**
- **Use humor sparingly, like a spice.** At first, try using a humorous opener to your speech. A quote or offhand observation can be a good icebreaker.
- **Keep it relevant to your speech topic.**
- **Avoid retelling jokes found on the Internet.** Chances are good others have already heard or seen them.
- **Keep it clean!** Humor is supposed to make people feel good – not embarrassed, insulted or offended.
- **Make it readily identifiable as humor.** But in case no one laughs, prepare a comment in advance or just move on.
- **Keep it appropriate to the audience and the situation.**
- **Self-effacing humor is safe** – a little of it goes a long way. The audience would rather hear about the time you fell on your face than when you won the race.
- **Work on your delivery.** Practice using vocal variety and gestures.
- **Timing is everything!** Pause before the punch line.
Why Laughter is Good For You

Laughter reduces stress and perks up the immune system.

By Kathryn Rose Gertz

Warning: Laughter may be hazardous to what ails you. That’s the message from researchers investigating the physiology of mirth. Not that laughter as good medicine is anything new. Even Hippocrates took note of its salutary effect. Now, though, there are studies to prove in measurable ways that laughter does in fact soothe the mind and restore the body.

“If medicine could harness the proven health benefits of laughter,” says Clifford Kuhn, M.D., professor of psychiatry at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, “drug companies would be knocking themselves out to get the patent.”

No question levity boosts resilience in the face of all manner of assault. Mirth, especially when directed at ourselves, imparts a sense of control, puts distance between us and our pain, gives us perspective, relieves tension, allows us to take a break. As Milton Berle put it, “Laughter is an instant vacation.”

But can it really help heal? Send in the clowns and get better? Dr. Kuhn, author of The Fun Factor, says yes and so do the scientists who have taken laughter into the lab and found that a walk on the funny side does a wondrous amount of good. Their work shows that laughter:

- Reduces the level of stress hormones
- Perks up the immune system
- Relaxes muscles
- Clears the respiratory tract
- Increases circulation
- Eases perceived pain

And at laugh’s end, feel-good endorphins flow, blood pressure settles down to below the norm, and increased oxygen to the brain revs up creativity. In short, laughter both stimulates and soothes, which is why we feel “enlivened, refreshed and clear-headed, much as we do after an aerobic workout,” observes laugh researcher Lee Berk, associate professor of pathology at Loma Linda University in California.

In fact, laughter really is a workout, according to psychiatrist William Fry, M.D., professor emeritus at Stanford University. “It’s a total body exercise,” he says. What’s more, the benefits build when you laugh often and regularly; as with any exercise, conditioning requires repetition. Dr. Fry should know. He has been researching mirth for more than 40 years and is considered the grandfather of the field.

But laughter is not a subject that lends itself easily to scientific scrutiny. It’s a surprisingly complex physical response to the psychological tickle of humor. Indeed, this seemingly simple act involves most of our body systems, including, of course, the brain. Using pinpoint imaging to eyeball the brain circuitry of volunteers as they laugh, scientists can
track the movement of mer-riment as it activates both left and right hemispheres. Maybe this brain-wide involvement is why, as writer Daniel Goleman notes in his book Emotional Intelligence, "laughter…seems to help people think more broadly and associate more freely." Call is the "ha-ha to aha!" effect.

Dr. Fry takes it a step further. "All mental stimulation expands brain function," he says, "which is a good reason to laugh a lot."

**Immune Booster**

Another fine reason is the measurable impact of laughter on the immune system. Dr. Berk's field of interest is psychoneuroimmunology, the study of how the brain and the immune system, in effect, talk to each other. To listen in on this "conversation," he hooks subjects up to IVs and angiocatheters and monitors them as they watch comedy tapes. Taking blood samples at 10-minute intervals, he has found that levels of the stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine actually lower when we laugh. (They both rise when we're anxious and contribute to the recurrence of heart attacks.) He has also shown that laughing increases antibody immunoglobin A, which fights upper-respiratory-tract infections, mobilizes cells that attack tumors and viruses, and activates infection-fighting white blood cells.

**The Humor Cure**

A demonstration of laughter's splendid power lies in the experience of Saranne Rothberg, a single mother from New Jersey who was diagnosed five years ago, at age 35, with advanced breast cancer. At the time, she was struggling through a contentious divorce and had a 5-year-old daughter, Lauriel, to keep safe and happy. Would she have the strength to parent? Would she even survive? From the doctor's office, Saranne went right to the video store and rented every comedy video on the shelves. The next morning, thanks to Bill Cosby, et al., she put aside her considerable tears and enlisted her daughter and friends as "humor buddies" to tell her funny stories every day. So unshakably passionate was Saranne about the goodness of laughter that during the grueling course of three surgeries, 44 radiation treatments and two years of immune-weakening chemotherapy, she founded a charity, the ComedyCures Foundation, to bring humor strategies to others. Through it all, Saranne worked on the foundation, cared for Lauriel and, of course, laughed. "I was around illness all the time," she recalls, "but I never even got a cold. It was as though my cancerous breast and I laughed and turned stress and disease on its head. We laughed and moved on." Today she is cancer free. "I learned that whatever happens, you have a choice," she says. "Choosing to laugh puts you in control."

Though not everyone experiences such a turnaround, Saranne's triumph over illness hardly surprises Dr. Kuhn, who runs humor-therapy groups for cancer patients and is himself a part-time stand-up comic. "Laughter is there precisely for the purpose of keeping our balance when we get knocked off," he says. "It helps counteract things we would otherwise have no control over."

**Why We Laugh**

Is this why human beings are blessed with the ability to laugh? Or, alternatively, did laughter evolve to help us connect and bond with each other in order to ensure survival of the species, as Robert Provine, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Maryland and author of Laughter: A Scientific Investigation, suggests?

Both of these theories may be true, happily coexisting under the heading of endurance – the endurance of mind and body.

Of course there are those who wonder if it really matters why we laugh and what happens in the body when we do. Isn't it enough just to enjoy a good joke? Experts say it actually does matter because the knowledge gained may one day affect the medical treatment we receive and even eliminate the need for some of it. Consider, for example, Dr. Berk's study showing that mirthful laughter not only lowers the stress hormones that can induce arrhythmias, but is also useful in the process of cardiac rehabilitation. More research is needed, but why wait for science? Go ahead and laugh now. Laugh 'til the cows come home and don't worry if the joke is "udder" nonsense. If you do this often, you let fresh air into your mind and sunshine into your soul. You may even fix what's broken and live happily ever after.

**Kathryn Rose Gertz is a New York-based freelance writer.**

**Laughter Begins at Home**

We laugh instinctively. In fact, laughter is so hard-wired in us that we would actually have to be taught not to. Academy Award winner Goldie Hawn explains, "It starts from the beginning with how you build your family. Our family laughs together. We laugh at our mis-takes. We make sure we laugh in a funny way at each other, and that we are able to take it so that we learn to have self humor. That in itself is so incredibly healing."

Here, then, are some tips from Joel Goodman of the HUMOR Project to help families jumpstart laughter at home:
• On a rotating basis, have each family member be responsible for a “humor bulletin board” on the refrigerator. Each week a different person puts up cartoons, quirky quotes, humorous news stories, silly photos.
• Take funny photos and, once a month, compile them in a family-fun photo album. Or take digital photos and put them on your family Web site.
• Once a week, or even every day, have a joke-around at the dinner table where everybody shares something that made them laugh.
• Encourage your kids to keep their own humor journals by suggesting they write stories and draw pictures about things that have tickled their funny bones that day. Periodically reread these stories with your kids to re-enjoy the humor.

Tears and Cheers
It may seem futile to laugh in the face of pain and fear, but studies show that laughter, with its saving way of shifting perspective, is a broad-spectrum analgesic, a balm for both physical and psychological wounds.

When Dan Rather interviewed comedian Bill Cosby, just one week after his son, Ennis, was killed, Cosby said: “I think it’s time for me to tell people that we have to laugh. You can turn painful situations around through laughter. If you can find humor in anything, you can survive it.”

Call it a flashlight for dark times: Laughter just seems to adjust attitude better than anything else. Inspirational speaker Steve Rizzo recalls a TV interview with an injured firefighter a few days after 9/11. The man had fallen more than 30 stories in one of the towers and had a broken leg. Everyone was crying, and the reporter asked, “How is it that you’ve come out of this alive?” He looked at her and without missing a beat, said, “Look, lady, I’m from New York and I’m a fire-fighter; that’s all you need to know.”

“Everyone laughed and though the laughter was only a couple of seconds,” says Rizzo, “some-times that’s all you need to catch your second wind. Laughter gives you that couple of seconds. You’re sending a message to your brain, and the message is: If you can still laugh even a little amid the pain and chaos, you’re going to be OK.”

Of course, there’s a difference between laughing off a serious situation and laughing off the fear that results. The firefighter was doing the latter, states Rizzo, the author of Becoming a Humor Being, and so should we. “If there’s anything we learned from 9/11, it’s how precious life really is,” he says. “We have to send a message that our spirit won’t die. One important thing that unites us is our ability to laugh.”