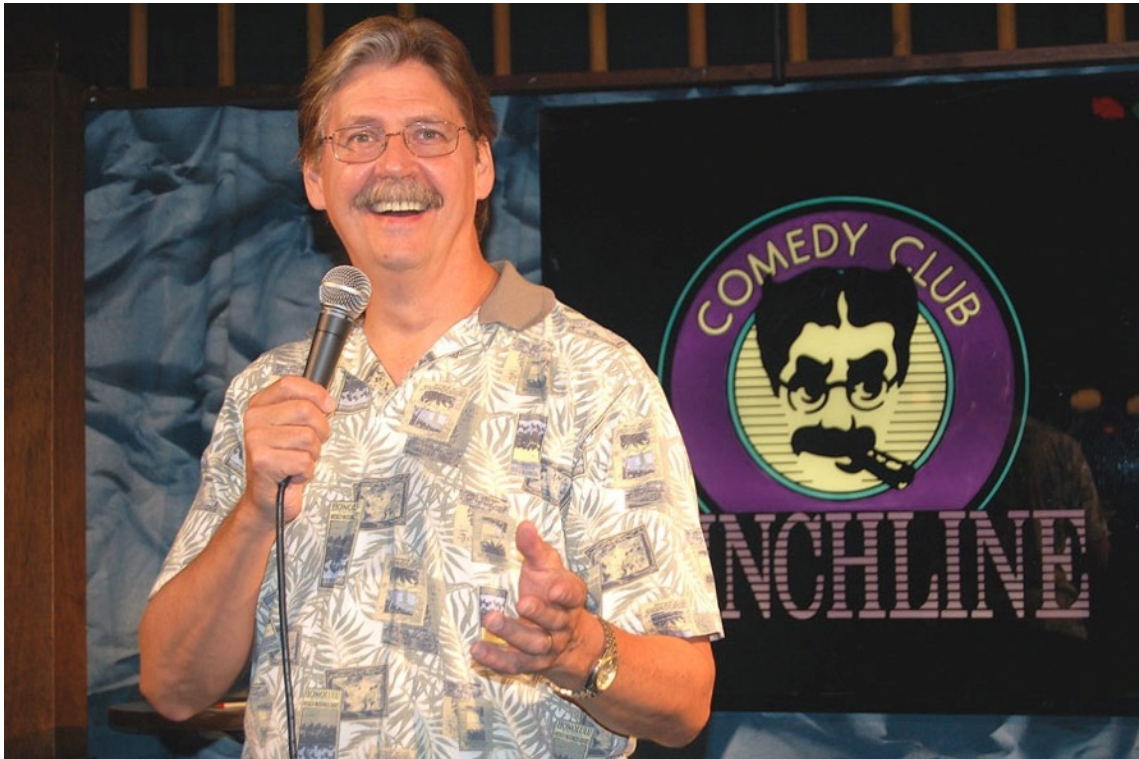


## TWENTY MISTAKES THAT NORMAL PEOPLE MAKE



### WHEN TRYING TO BE FUNNY

Twenty common mistakes that will kill your jokes and stories

### **Anyone Can Be Funny(ier)**

## Anyone Can Be Funny(ier)

### 1

## Never announce that you're going to say something funny.

Never start off a presentation by saying something like, "I'd like to start off with a really funny joke I heard." First of all when you announce a joke it takes the surprise away and one of the best things that you have going for you when you use humor is surprise. When you say that you're going to start off with a really funny joke you are also setting the level of expectations very high, usually too high to get a laugh. When you tell the audience that you like to start with something funny they're usually sitting there thinking, "Well I know some pretty funny jokes/stories this one better be hysterical." If you're going to start off your presentation using humor just do it! Don't announce it and definitely don't apologize for using humor.

Have you ever heard somebody start a presentation by saying, "Well, I'm not very good at telling stories or jokes but my wife says maybe I should start with one so what the heck, here it goes."

What I'm hearing is, "I'm not very good at using humor but I don't mind boring you folks to death."

## 2

### **What makes it funny always goes at the end.**

To put it a simpler way, the punch word is the last word of the punchline. You always want to put what makes the joke funny at the end so people now have a chance to laugh. Many times the punch word changes the meaning of everything that goes before it so you wouldn't want to put that in the middle of the sentence.

For example, the old Henny Youngman joke, "take my wife, please!" From the first part of that joke you think that he's saying take my wife, as an example but when he says please at the end you realize that he wants you to actually take his wife away. So if he said, "Take my wife please would you do me a favor, it really would help?" The joke would be ruined. Where the audience is supposed to start laughing, you're still talking which in turn stops them from laughing. So make sure you always save the surprise to the end.

## 3

### **If you want big laughs you have to shut up!**

One of the other big reasons for putting the punch word at the end of the punchline and not saying anything else is because that's where you want people to laugh so you need to shut up and let them laugh. If you keep talking they will stop laughing in order to hear what else you have to say and you don't want them to do that, do you?

I've listened to many speakers who before they spoke told me that they just weren't funny. They didn't use a lot of humor in their presentations. But when I listened to them I realize that they had many places that the audience could laugh if they would let them. One woman who took my comedy course told me that she wasn't funny but I knew she was just from talking to her. I finally realized that the reason why she didn't get laughs was she never stopped talking. Once I got her to finally zip her lips after she said the punch word it was amazing the turnaround in her presentation. She was deliv-

ering one-hour presentations for educational groups and by the end of the first week when she started listening to me and stopping at the end of punchlines, she actually had to take fifteen minutes of material out of her presentations because people were laughing so long and hard.

Now I'm not saying that every time you stop talking people are going laugh but I'll tell you this, every time you don't stop talking people won't. Once people realize that they have time to laugh after you stop they will, if it's funny. You can actually train them to laugh in short or long periods. Many of the Toastmasters who I've coached for the state and regional championships were shocked when I made them cut large amounts of material from their presentations. At the competitions they'd only have 7 minutes to present. I had to get them to take one and a half, sometimes two-minutes out of their presentations to allow for laughter especially with a larger crowd. An audience of a thousand laughs a lot longer than fifty or hundred do.

## 4

### **Never embellish or stretch out your story or joke.**

In humor the saying goes, the longer you make the joke or story the funnier the punchline has to be in order to get a good laugh. I know you love to stretch out your jokes when you're telling them to your friends at cocktail parties but when you're on stage making a presentation, shorter is better. You need to remove everything that you can from your story or joke that isn't pertinent to the punchline.

There's a story of a famous ivory carver being interviewed by a journalist. This artist carved the most incredible, realistic looking walruses. The journalist asked him how he was able to carve them to look so real. The artist said, "I just remove everything that isn't walrus." You should do the same with your jokes. Remove everything that isn't pertinent to the joke. If your

joke is about how bad your sister cooks we don't need to know that she lives out in the country in a trailer and has 6 dogs in the yard and 5 kids and shops at Walmart unless you have punchlines for all of those ideas. If the only funny thing you have to say is about her being a bad cook then forget the rest and get to the point. Gene Perrot, the famous sitcom writer, would tell his classes that when they write a joke imagine that the punchline is a major appliance that the audience is going to buy. The price they will pay for the appliance is equal to the amount of time they listened to the setup. The set up being everything that you say before you get the punchline. So the longer the setup is the more expensive the appliance is going to be. Then he would ask, "So, do you want to give your audience a good deal or bad deal?" The shorter the setup the better deal they get on the punchline. Such a bargain!

## 5

### **Prepare!**

If you've ever had any presentation or delivery training you've probably heard from the instructor to never, ever memorize your presentation. That you should just have an outline of what you're planning on saying and use that as jumping off points. That's great for presentation but when you use humor you have to memorize the joke or the story word for word. The reason being that just one wrong or left out word can completely destroy a great joke or story. As Mark Twain once said, "There's a big difference between lightning and lightning bug." I've seen more jokes bomb because someone left out or changed a word in the setup that was vital to the punchline.

Also, what happens when you don't have your humor memorized so that it just flows off your tongue, when you get to a part you can't quite remember you start adding words that don't belong while your brain manically tries to remember the correct word. As we all know by now, the longer you make it the funnier it has to be to get a laugh.

So remember when rehearsing your presentation you must memorize the humor word for word, no joke!

## 6

### **It's called the punchline for a reason!**

I've worked with many speakers who just murdered their jokes and stories by dropping their voice on the punchline.

Never ever drop your voice on the punchline. It's called the punchline because it's supposed to have some punch to it. I don't mean like the old Catskill comedians who over emphasized everything, but it does have to have more energy than the rest of your joke. It's *one* of the areas that you do emphasize. A good comedy coach can show you the words that need to be emphasized in your humor.

Even a deadpan comedian like Steven Wright still gives emphasis to his punch words. One of the toughest things I have to deal with, with my students, is to get them out of being monotone, especially the men. Which brings me to number seven.

## 7

### **Attitude is almost everything!**

When it comes to humor the reaction that you get from your audience depends mostly on your delivery. I would go as far to say that it's 10% material, 90% delivery. You don't believe me? Try reading this from Steve Martin and imagining that this would be funny without ever hearing his delivery. "Well, excuse me! I am a wild and crazy guy."

When Steve Martin delivered that line in his typical, Steve Martin fashion the audience would go wild but seeing it written on a piece of paper it just sits there. The same thing goes for Jimmy Walker's, "Dynamite!", Larry The Cable Guy's, "Get er done!" or Billy Crystal's, "You look marvelous!" Am I dating myself? Yes, I am but it does make the point.

Imagine listening to a song and it was just one note all the way through. I bet you wouldn't listen to that song very long. The same thing with comedy and stories you have to use inflection, excitement, vocal color, attitude and delivery to rock your material like a pro.

My students asked me, "What delivery should I use for this line?" I say, "What attitude caused you to write the joke in the first place?"

"Was it something that made you mad, sad, feel sarcastic, angry, envious, serious, jealous, stupid or any of a number of other emotions?" Whatever attitude caused you to write the joke is the attitude you should use to deliver it.

Many times you'll find yourself using one attitude in the setup and a different one in the punchline. In this case your attitude in the setup makes your audience think you feel one way about your subject and in the punchline they realize you feel the opposite. The old switch-a-roo!

## 8

### **It's not your words.**

A while back I was working with one of my private coaching clients, a senior vice president with a big power company. As I listened to her in her speech announced the awards the company had one recently I told her to stop. I asked, "Are these important awards that your company won?" She said, "Yes, they are the highest award you can win and our industry."



I said she sounded like she was reading her grocery store. There was no energy in it. No energy meant no emphasis. That's when it occurred to me that it's your voice and not your words that tells the listener what's important.

So many executives think that everybody is enthralled with what they have to say because they are the boss. How many boring PowerPoint programs with rows and rows of numbers and figures have you slept through because some executive or manager thought that his/her information was so important that it would just have you on the edge of your seat.

It's the same with comedy. It's your voice and not your words that tells the listener what's funny and what your attitude is. It's also your voice and not your words that lets the audience know what words in your setup are important to the punchline as well.

## 9

### **Don't tell me you love me, show me!**

If you're a man you've probably heard this at some time in your life from a loved one. "Don't tell me how much you love me, show me," ie flowers, jewelry, stock options. The same thing can be said for comedy, you always show them instead of tell them.

You would never say, "Then I said to him angrily." You would just say whatever you are going to say, angrily. You describe the way people feel or act in the written word like books and articles because that's the only way the person who is consuming that media would know what that person's attitude was.

One of the great thing about being in front of an audience is that you get to show them with your voice and body how you felt about something that upset you or you found so incredibly stupid or something that confused you. Your voice can relate all those things.

Same thing goes if your line is about the time you ran all the way home and were so out of breath you could hardly speak, don't tell them, show them! Let yourself be out of breath when you relate that to the audience.



## 10

### **The no, no list.**

The type of material you want to stay away from, especially in a business situation are sexist, ethnic, religious, political, racist jokes or blue material (which is comedy code for cursing). I don't care if this joke kills every time you tell it to your friends or even in mixed groups of friends, don't tell it in business and large social settings. I figure it this way. If I think I need to ask somebody if this joke would be okay to do in front of a certain group what I'm really saying is I don't think this is appropriate do you? Follow this simple philosophy and you will never go wrong: when in doubt leave it out! Why take a chance of offending anybody? I've never had people get upset with me for being too clean. Seriously no one's ever come up and said you know I like it but it would've been better if you'd cursed more"

I'm still amazed at how many times, when I am attending a corporate function where I'm going to be one of the speakers, that one of the executives are managers on the program uses sexist material, curses or uses totally inappropriate humor. No matter how funny you think your political jokes are if you're speaking to a mixed audience you're alienating at least half the people in the room. Even though your group with think it's a clever joke the other group will not appreciate it whatsoever.

## 11

### **Poke who? Poke you, that's who.**

Always remember to poke a little fun at yourself and show the audience you're human and that you don't take yourself that seriously. All of the great speakers do it. I always make sure that use some humor that pokes fun at myself within the first three or four minutes of every presentation. That one thing will really help you connect with the audience.

You may be thinking that if you poke fun at yourself people may not take you seriously. Hey, they probably don't anyway. Actually, the opposite is true. They have found in study after study that people feel that if you are willing and able to poke fun at yourself and/or what you do, you must be extremely confident in who you are and what you do. Think of the people that you admire as great leaders. Are they people that can laugh themselves, poke fun at themselves or people that are dead serious? Serious people scare me. They're the ones that start wars. You never hear goofy people saying, "Well okay, let's nuke 'em!"

I'll talk about how after one show a young guy came up and said, "Man, you look like that dude on TV."

I said, "I hear that all the time. Who are you thinking of, Jeff Foxworthy?"

He said, "No! The neighbor on, The Simpsons."

That joke gets a laugh about 100% of the time. Its great because like I said it bonds me with the audience and makes me seem like one of the guys and now they know that I don't take myself too seriously.

## 12

### Are you relevant?

If you're going to put humor into a presentation make sure that it's relevant to the group you're talking to and to the subject that you're talking about. Don't put humor in just to try to get a laugh. I tell many of my clients that they should never use humor in the presentation except to make a point. You don't want to start a presentation by saying, "Okay, so these 3 guys walk in a bar..." That is almost a sure recipe for either bombing or doing inappropriate material which will bomb. The good thing is if you have a good story or some good humor you can almost always find a way to get it to

make your point. I know some speakers that use the same exact story in four or five different programs and each in program it makes a different point.

So if you're talking to a group of airplane mechanics then you shouldn't be doing jokes about how stupid The Bachelor is because it's not relevant to what you're talking about. Also if you're using humor to make your point you will also get better laughs. If you're using an old joke to make a point the audience will be a lot more generous with their laughter then if they feel like you're just telling an old joke to try to get a laugh.

## **13** Stop telegraphing!

Telegraphing the punchline refers to when you prematurely reveal the outcome in your story or joke by prefacing the punchline with words and phrases like, "Well here comes the bad part or unfortunately or surprisingly." That would take the surprise away from your punchline. If your setup convinces the audience that the outcome of your joke will be something positive and you switch it so its negative, the joke will be ruined if you preface the punchline by saying, "but, unfortunately or sadly." You want to keep the surprise hidden until the very last moment when it will have the most impact. Let them enjoy the surprise so you can enjoy their laughter.

## **14** Why three?

Have you ever noticed that most jokes that you tell with friends have an element of three? Three guys walk into the bar. A priest, rabbi and a nun are in an airplane. The first one says or does this, the second one says or does something inline with the first

one then the third one says or does something completely different which is the punchline.

The reason for the threes is a lot of comedy depends on creating a pattern then breaking it and two is the smallest number that you can have to create a pattern with the third one breaking it. Four is too many. That's why you don't have jokes or stories that start with, "A priest, a rabbi, a monk, a Buddhist, and a left-handed Lithuanian walk into a bar."

The first two are the setup and the third one is always the punchline.

**15**

## **So how does this threes thing work?**

In many cases the first two things that you say are normal and the third is in direct opposition of the other two. For example, in a corporate presentation I might identify someone in that audience and say, "Bob here travels seventy miles roundtrip to work every day because he's determined, dedicated and can't find work in his own hometown."

The biggest mistake that people do with the threes is to try to list 3 funny things. If you do that the first one has to be funny, the second one very funny and the third one hysterical to keep getting laughs. If the three of them are equally funny the first one gets a ha, ha, ha, ha the next one gets a ha and the third one gets silence. So in that case each one of the three would need to be more extreme, more bizarre, a bigger exaggeration of the one before it to get laughs.

**16**

## **Then what the heck's a list joke?**

In this type of joke you name three things to get the audience thinking in one direction and the fourth one is the switch. “Last night I had to go to the downtown emergency room. It was a nightmare! People were yelling at me, cursing at me, trying to steal my money. I’m telling you, I’m not going to take that from doctors.” Or, “Last week I was in the backwoods of Alabama. Boy were the people there scary. Bushy beards, big guts, bad teeth... and the men are worse.

## 17

### Do the research

Always research your audience. There’s a big difference between doing humor for the Board of Directors and doing humor for the hourly wage employees. Those two groups most likely will laugh at different things. Usually the hourly wage employees love to laugh at management. Just be careful with that one because management is one that makes sure that your check clears or you keep your job. But if you are in management and you’re poking fun at yourselves, that’s even better. This way you’re poking fun at management and you getting the bonus of poking fun at yourself.

Just make sure that if you are in management that your humor is not poking fun at the employees. It’s okay to make fun of people above you such as the hourly wage employees make fun of management but it’s not okay for management to make fun of the people that work for them.

Just as it’s okay for us, the common folks to make fun of our political leaders but it’s not okay for them to make fun of us. As I said in number 10, “When in doubt, leave it out!”

## 18

### **Don't put them down.**

I would say as a general rule never put down the group you're talking to or the city you are talking in. Whenever I am hired to work for a group of lawyers someone will invariably say to me, "Oh! Make sure you tell a lot of lawyer jokes. They love those." That's when I say to them, "Well then you tell them some?"

The thing is, if I go up there and tell jokes that put down lawyers then I am up there making fun of them. If one of them, who is a lawyer, tells lawyer jokes than they are poking fun of themselves. Be very careful with that because they can get you in a lot of trouble.

The same thing with the city you're speaking in. People love their city and don't like it when you belittle it so instead of poking fun of their city you can poke fun of where you came from or you can poke fun of an attribute of their city. So if I was talking in Seattle which is known for Starbucks coffee and many other coffee companies I might say, "Before I came I wanted to make sure when I arrived I was on the same level as everybody else here so I seriously up my caffeine level" or I might make fun of the fact that there's a Starbucks on almost every corner. "I actually had a Starbucks in my hotel room." That's not poking fun of the city it's poking fun at an attribute of the city. Hopefully that makes sense to you.

## 19

### **Don't laugh all the way through telling you joke or story.**

It's very annoying and the mark of an amateur when someone keeps breaking up and laughing throughout the whole time they're telling their story. It's okay to enjoy it but enjoy it at the end along with everyone else.

## The super duper speaking secret, Ad Libbing!

I'm not fibbing when I tout ad libbing. Most people never consider this sure-fire laugh-getter.

**Stop! Analyze! Respond!** The worse thing you can do in an awkward situation is to ignore it. The best thing you can do is prepare for it ahead of time.

**Jay Leno** says, "For every ten jokes you write maybe two of them will be funny. For every ten you make up on the spot eight will be funny because the audience knows you couldn't have possibly written that before because they just saw it happen," or could you?

Have you ever been with a friend or coworker when something happened, one of you made a comment and you both became hysterical with laughter? Then when you tried to convey the experience to others, they just stared at you like a deer in headlights? At that moment you probably found yourself saying, "I guess you had to be there."

The reason ad libs are so powerful is that they are, "You had to be there" type humor. The audience sees you react on the spot to an incident whether it's a horn blowing, you tripping, forgetting your place, an easel crashing to the floor or simply the food arriving late. If they think you just came up with that response, you will be rewarded with gales, possibly squalls of laughter.

The good news is that you can prepare for these situations. List all of the things that could go wrong during a presentation and write a quick response to each. Even just a humorous observation will get the audience to laugh and break the tension because they will think you're making it up on the spot.

Also, always write down your legitimate ad libs for use at a future date. If something does come up and you have no good response look at it later and consider what you could have done or said and save it in a humor folder. Next time that situation arises you'll be ready to rock them, if you've practiced.

Some people are afraid to use humor because they're worried that they are not funny and might bomb or look foolish. Hey, I have news for you: You don't have to use humor to look foolish. You risk looking foolish every time you open your mouth. You see people every day that are silly, obnoxious or boring without ever telling a joke. Think politicians.



If you want to be funny you need to make ad libs a regular part of your presentations. To make it easy on you I've produced a cd of all of my favorites that I've used for years. Some I made up, some too good to pass up.

Commit some of them to memory so when the right opportunity presents itself, your ad lib will roll off your tongue like a seasoned pro. Put in the work now and reap the laughter later.

You can even practice by watching other speakers and trainers and mentally saying your ad libs when an appropriate situation arises. (Remember this is not a good time to say them out loud).

If you would like to order the cd, **"How to Ad Lib Like a Professional (or just look like one)** click here: <http://tinyurl.com/kek7tpf>

When you order I'll include the ebook for free!

To learn more about Jeff's Keynotes, Coaching and Comedy Workshoppe go to:

<http://www.Jeffjustice.com>