

Comedy at the BBC

Ever since the BBC began broadcasting to the nation, the word 'entertain' has been pretty high up on the agenda. As the UK blinked its way out of the darkness after the Second World War, it turned to the fledgling BBC to bring a smile back to the nation's faces. With early radio programmes such as **The Goons** or **Hancock's Half Hour** proving to be a huge success with the nations, the stage was set for comedy writers to bring us a huge range of television comedy programmes, from sketch shows like **Monty Python's Flying Circus**, **French and Saunders** and **That Mitchell and Webb Look** to shows featuring stand-up comedy such as **Mock the Week**, **Live at the Apollo** and **Russell Howard's Good News**.

An introduction to comedy writing

One of the most important ways we communicate is by making each other laugh. Telling someone a funny joke is brilliant for everyone: the person who hears the joke feels good, and the person who tells it does too. We share jokes among our school friends, at home with our family and as adults in the workplace.

Comedy writing is all about using words and language to make people laugh. If you tell a joke to your friends, only you and your friends get to hear it. If you write some jokes that are performed, published or even broadcast, then they're out there for the whole world to hear, and everyone has the opportunity to laugh along.

Comedy writers take a lot of care over their work. They try to choose the best words to put on the page. They use particular skills and techniques to make their jokes as funny as possible. By trying these skills and techniques for ourselves, we can increase our confidence with words and language, as well as coming up with comedy writing that everyone can enjoy.

There are many different kinds of comedy writing. In this Comedy Classroom pack, we focus on three of them, but you might find a whole new way to make people laugh.

There are many different kinds of comedy writing, but our resources will focus on three main categories:

- **Stand-up comedy** – the writer performs words that put across their own particular view of the world
- **Sketch comedy** – the writer turns a funny idea into a scene that people can perform
- **Caption comedy** – the writer looks at an image and creates a funny line to go with it

What to do next

The next three pages include fact sheets on each of these three styles of comedy writing, with plenty of tips that you can share with your students. We've also provided a Comedy Toolbox and glossary that can be downloaded and printed separately to give to students to refer to whilst writing their comedy.



The BBC Comedy Classroom resources and activities were engaging and fun as all pupils were given the opportunity to share their favourite comedies and jokes. The Comedy Toolbox gave pupils the terms to discuss what makes them laugh and inspired them to have a go at writing their own jokes. It was great to see everyone joining in and to hear a classroom filled with laughter.

Jayne Robson

English teacher
Archbishop Blanch School



CLASS JOKER

*** STAND-UP ***

Russell Howard, Kevin Bridges, Sarah Millican, Omid Djalili, Michael McIntyre
– some of Britain's most popular TV celebrities are stand-up comedians.

In the Class Joker activities, look out for the funniest people in your classroom. This style of writing can encourage them to get their best jokes down on paper before turning them into a filmed performance. Does your school contain some budding stand-ups?

Stand-up tips for students

- Stand-ups make it look like they're coming up with everything on the spot, but in fact they prepare carefully for every performance.
- It may look like they're just talking naturally, but stand-ups use many elements from the Comedy Toolbox in their performances. Misdirection, metaphor and repetition are particularly important to stand-ups.
- All great stand-ups have their own distinctive way of looking at the world and it's often called their 'comedy voice'. Performing stand-up allows us to express our own personal feelings about the world around us.
- Think about what YOU find funny. The audience will enjoy your set if it looks like you are too. As the great comedian Bill Bailey says when writing jokes: "Start with a laugh and then work backwards from there."
- A stand-up routine can involve telling a story, discussing a particular subject, simply telling jokes or a mixture of all of these. Every stand-up needs to think about what approach works best for them.
- Decide if you want to use a microphone as a prop or to help with your performance. If you do, will you use it in a stand? Things like this can matter if you intend to move around on stage.
- Try to make eye contact with as much of your audience as possible. If there is a connection between you, they are more likely to laugh. Encourage them to see your point of view verbally.
- Be understandable. The audience needs to follow what you are saying, so remember to slow down, try to relax and pronounce your words as clearly as you can.
- Think about the order you are telling your story or joke in. Consciously and deliberately decide what information to leave in or out.
- Delivery is really important. Don't forget, it's not just what you say, but how you say it that can make an audience laugh out loud. Your facial expressions, timing and tone are all important. Can you 'do the voices' of the characters in your routine? Have a play with it.
- The golden rule of stand-up is – be as funny as possible. The more jokes that can be crammed into a stand-up routine, the better. That's one of the reasons why preparation is so important.

TOP PERFORMANCE TIPS:

When performing stand-up, always remember the three Ps:



- **PAUSES:** Using pauses in stand-up helps to hold the audience's attention.
- **PACE:** Going faster in some places and slower in others can help make a routine more interesting.
- **PRACTICE:** The more times you perform a routine, the funnier it gets.



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BBC.CO.UK/COMEDYCLASSROOM

bbc.co.uk/comedyclassroom

CLASS ACT

*** THE SKETCH ***



From *Walliams & Friend* to *Horrible Histories*, we all love sketches. For a sketch, what you need is one big funny idea that you can turn into a scene, then pack it with big characters, plenty of action and, of course, jokes.

The Class Act sequence will give your students the tools and opportunity to write some brand new sketches about anything they wish. Think of weird scenarios, unusual characters or crazy things going on in life.

Sketch tips for students

- All the best sketches start with one great idea. That's the acorn from which the comedy tree grows. Brainstorming is a good way to come up with that great initial idea. You may come up with 20 before you settle on the one you want.
- Try to identify where the laughs are likely to come in your sketch. You only have a short amount of time so try to cram in as many opportunities for laughter as you can.
- Sketches often involve strong characters who speak and behave in interesting or unusual ways. Thinking about funny characters can help when coming up with ideas for sketches.
- Thinking of interesting and unusual situations is another good way of coming up with sketch ideas. Are there particular places or times when funny things might be more likely to happen?
- A sketch should start with a good idea and build towards an unexpected ending. The ending is particularly important in a sketch because everyone loves a great punchline.
- Sketches don't just have to be about people talking. Action can help to make things more interesting and entertaining. That means using stage directions, as well as writing dialogue.
- Topical sketches can be very funny, but remember, by the time you perform your sketch it may not be quite so topical anymore. Try to find 'timeless' laughs.
- When writing your sketch, try to look at the situation from a new angle, play devil's advocate. Santa Claus may be a lovely guy, but he breaks into your house while you sleep, wanders around and eats your biscuits. Every story has another viewpoint.
- There's no need to make a sketch too complicated. Most of the best sketches keep things simple, with just a few characters and a single situation.



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TOP SKETCH TIPS:

Each sketch should have:

- A BIG IDEA
- A beginning, a middle and an end
 - Dialogue
 - Action (as stage directions)
- JOKES!

HA!
HA!



CLASS COMIC

*** CLEVER CAPTIONS ***

You might have seen comedy captions on TV, in shows like *Mock the Week* or *Have I Got News for You*? It's a great way to get a big laugh from an unexpected combination of words and pictures.

The Class Comic activities can uncover some fantastic laugh-out-loud captions to go with each of the images we've supplied on student-facing slides.

Caption tips for students

- The best comedy captions make us look at the pictures they describe in a whole new way. The obvious is not always that funny.
- Ask yourself lots of questions about the picture before you start writing. Answer all the "Who? What? Why? When? Where? How?" questions before you start.
- One good way of coming up with a funny caption is to decide what the people in the picture are really thinking. Do they have secret thoughts they wouldn't want us to know about?
- Metaphor can also be a useful tool in writing a comedy caption. Does the picture remind us of anything else? Can we use that idea to come up with a funny caption?
- A comedy caption might take the form of a headline describing what's going on in the picture or it might be a line of dialogue from one of the people in the picture.
- Comedy writers will come up with lots of alternative captions for a single picture, then spend time editing their favourite one. Can you convey your comic idea in fewer, plainer words?
- With the growth of social media, memes have become a popular way of telling jokes through the internet. If there are any memes you have seen, what made them effective and made you laugh?
- Great comedy captions tend to be short. They make a strong and funny point using as few words as possible. Try to get everything across in the space of a single sentence.



TOP TIP ON DRAFTING AND REDRAFTING

As with any piece of work, first thoughts and ideas are not always the best. Go back to your work and get others to give you feedback on what works well and what needs improving. Even the most experienced comedians will try out new material on a test audience before they go out on tour, so you should do the same.



SUPPORTING MATERIAL ONLINE
BBC.CO.UK/COMEDYCLASSROOM



TOP CAPTION TIPS:

Change our view of the picture and make us think about what's really going on

- Can be a headline or piece of dialogue
- Be short... and funny

Using SPAG for comedy writing

There are a variety of ways that your pupils can use the rules they have learned for spelling, punctuation and grammar in their comedy writing. The trick is knowing when to use those rules and then when to subvert them. Here are a few hints and ideas to get you going.

Full stops

Perfect for punchlines, the full stop gives you a definite end to your sentence and is hopefully the cue for your audience to laugh.

Exclamation marks

Was your funny story a little bit shocking for your audience? It was! Use an exclamation mark to tell them.

Question marks

Do you want to ask your audience some rhetorical questions? If you do, you'll need to remember to add some question marks for them. Won't you?

Elipsis

Does your joke have a natural punchline or do you want to leave your audience hanging so they draw their own funny conclusions? You may wish to use an ellipsis to let them know that you're leaving them to think for themselves...

Noun phrases

A noun phrase will always get you a bigger laugh when telling your funny story. Was your character wearing a suit? Or was she wearing a bright yellow sequin-encrusted banana suit? Get those adjectives in to give your audience those comedy descriptions.

Commas & semi colons

Lists are always funny, especially when we are using repetition in our work. If we remember to space them out using commas or semi colons, then we can slowly build a laugh for our audience. We can make boring lists with endless dull descriptions to send them to sleep; dark, brooding sentences which go bump in the night to scare them; or bright, funny and exciting lists to make them laugh. It's up to you!

Speech marks & colons

Beware of the speech mark. They are definitely useful when writing stories but, when we are writing scripts, we replace them with a colon to show who is speaking next. Have a look at the example script in the pack to get the hang of how to use them in your own writing.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are great for surprises. If you want your audience to expect one thing and then get another, you'll need a conjunction to link your sentence together. They might be expecting a character to walk into a room, but they get a man wearing a walrus outfit juggling oranges instead!

adjective

for and
but

Comedy Glossary

Alongside the definitions in the Comedy Toolbox, here are some really useful words that you might find helpful for assembling your own pieces of comedy writing.

Call-back

A call-back is when a comedy writer refers back to an earlier joke to get a second or even third laugh from the same joke.

Caricature

This is a character that uses a distorted or exaggerated version of a person's features or personality to create a comic effect.

Deadpan

A type of comic delivery with all the usual emotion taken out. Usually a deadpan comic will also keep their facial expressions to a minimum.

Dialogue

A scene which has at least two characters speaking to each other.

Escalation

The process of turning a small joke into a bigger and funnier story, usually with an exaggerated and over-the-top conclusion.

Farce

A fast-paced piece of set comedy that involves a lot of slapstick and usually contains people entering and exiting quickly or mistaking character identities.

Homophone

Words which may have the same pronunciation but different meanings, often used to make a pun or misdirect someone in a joke.

One-liner

A joke which is a single sentence but packs the punchline in straightaway: "Hedgehogs – why can't they just share with everyone else?"

Pace

The speed at which a scene or routine is run. Controlling the pace means controlling when the audience laughs.

Pun

A homophone that "sounds like" another to try and make a cheesy joke: 'Making this omelette is really EGG-citing!'

Punchline

The end line or final joke in a funny story or sketch. Sometimes referred to as the 'big laugh'.

Satire

A type of comedy that pokes fun at a serious issue or tries to undermine people in authority, like the government.

Simile

When a comparison is made for comic effect: "Your feet smell worse than a skunk's underpants!"

Stereotype

An instantly recognisable 'type' of person which isn't always based in reality. For example, a doctor is posh and wears a white coat; a school caretaker will be grumpy and jangle keys.

Suspension of disbelief

The idea that an audience will always believe in your story, despite it normally being unbelievable.

Wit

The idea that words can be played around with verbally to get a funnier meaning. Wit can use twisted logic, puns or double meanings to make things funny.

Comedy Toolbox

As any good comedian will tell you, there is more than one way to get a belly-aching, side-splitting laugh from your audience. In this Comedy Toolbox, we have brought together some of the many different techniques that can be used to create a fantastic piece of comedy. Just like when you are building something, you'll need to use a variety of comedy tools for different comedy jobs. All comedians use these tools – and they should come in handy when you are writing for all the categories we explore in this resource. We have coloured them to match with the learning sequences in this pack.

HA!
HA!



Repetition

This is when you use the same word or phrase over again to make what people say sound funnier.

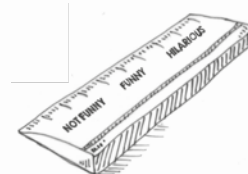
"I like beans. Runner beans, broad beans, kidney beans, baked beans, big beans, small beans, even washed-up old has-beens. I like beans."



Inversion

This is where you take a normal situation and make it the opposite of what it usually is.

"If this business deal is to go well, we have to look utterly professional – so I've brought us all skintight bumblebee costumes to wear to the interview."



Metaphor

This is when you highlight a characteristic of something by describing it as something it is not – and if you choose the right metaphor, you can get a very funny result.

"It's an hour of torture in the most brutal prison known to man. Or as I call it, double physics."



Absurdity

This is when you get a laugh by doing or saying something completely unexpected – in fact, something completely random.

"Teacher: What is the capital of France? Student: Badgers?"



Juxtaposition

This is when you combine two things that don't normally go together and the unexpectedness of the combination makes it funny.

"My name is James Bond 007, licence to kill. I used to work for MI5, but now I run my own shoe shop."



Put downs

Being cheeky can sometimes be funny, as long as we don't make the jokes too personal. Put downs are often used in dialogue when one person thinks they are more important than the other.

"Right now, you're about as much use to me as a snowman in a heatwave!"



Misdirection

This is when you lead an audience to expect one thing, and surprise them with an unexpected ending.

"I used to throw up every day on the school bus. That's when I realised I wasn't cut out to be a driver."



Slapstick

This is when you use physical humour – falling over, dropping something, bumping into someone – rather than dialogue to get a laugh.

"The headteacher is walking down the corridor. She sees a banana skin on the floor, steps round it, and carries on walking. Then she slips on a huge patch of grease and falls backwards with her legs in the air."



Sarcasm

This is when you say something that isn't true, and everyone listening knows that you don't think it's true.

"Oh joy! Oh fun! Another maths test! Hooray hoorah!"



SpooF

This is when you make your own funny version of a TV show, film or situation that already exists.

"Welcome back to the eggs factor! Where we find out if chickens really can sing!"

Example script

This is how your written script should be laid out...



Numberwang

Written by Mark Evans
and James Bachman

The idea was thought of
by Mark Evans, James
Bachman and David
Wolstencroft

MUSIC: AN UPBEAT SLIGHTLY MAD THEME
THE SET IS A BRIGHTLY LIT GAMESHOW SET
BUT WITH NUMBERS EVERYWHERE

Stage directions
are clearly marked
in a different form
for the reader to
know it is not part
of the dialogue

HOST

Hello and welcome to Numberwang, the maths quiz that simply everyone is talking about.
Our contestants tonight are Julie from Somerset and Simon from Somerset. Okay,
if you're ready, let's play Numberwang.

DRAMATIC MILLIONAIRE-STYLE MUSIC

Spoof – the
game show
sounds almost
the same as any
other on TV

JULIE
Three.

SIMON
Nine.

JULIE
Sixteen.

SIMON
Twelve.

JULIE
Err... Eight point two.

Inversion – the
game appears
to have no
real rules

SIMON
Four.

HOST

That's Numberwang! Round two, Simon to play first.

SIMON
Twenty-seven.

JULIE
Thirty.

SIMON
Nineteen.

JULIE
Eighty-four.

HOST

That's Numberwang! Let's go to the Maths Board. Julie.
THERE IS A BOARD. IT HAS LOTS OF NUMBERS ON IT

JULIE

I'll take the four... the six... and the three point four.

HOST

That's Numberwang! We love those decimals, Julie. Simon?

SIMON

I'd like the root fourteen... and the twelve.

HOST

That's Numberwang! Round three. Julie to play first.

A DIFFERENT BOARD APPEARS. IT IS STILL JUST FULL OF NUMBERS. EVERY TIME A
CONTESTANT SAYS A NUMBER, AN UNCONNECTED ONE LIGHTS UP ON THE BOARD

JULIE

Eight minus four.

HOST

That's Numberwang! Simon?

SIMON

A hundred and nine times seventeen.

HOST

That's Numberwang. Julie.

JULIE

Forty-seven...



HOOTER

HOST

That's the Numberwang bonus! Triple Numberwang to Julie. So, Julie you're ahead on seventy-seven and
Simon, you're trailing on eighty-three. Everything hinges on this final round. It's time for Wanger-numb.
Let's rotate the board.

THE BOARD ROTATES BLANKETY-BLANK STYLE REMOVING JULIE AND
SIMON AND REVEALING TWO MORE CONTESTANTS.

HOST

Let's play Wanger-numb. Clive to go first.

CLIVE

Forty-three.

HOST

Ian?

IAN

Nineteen.

CLIVE

Two... hundred.

IAN

Three.

CLIVE

One.

IAN

One.

CLIVE

One.

IAN

One.

CLIVE

One...

HOST

Oooh...

IAN

One...

HOST

Ah...

CLIVE

One?

HOST

Eeee...

IAN

Er... one?

HOST

That's Wanger-numb!!!

CRAZY MUSIC, FLASHING LIGHTS, GLITTER EVERYWHERE. TWO SPARKLY DRESSED
MODELS COME OUT AND DRAPE A ROBE COVERED IN NUMBERS ON IAN. THEY PUT
A BAG OVER CLIVE'S HEAD. IT HAS THE WORD 'NO' WRITTEN ON IT
THE HOST HANDS IAN A MASSIVE CHEQUE. IT HAS 'CHILDREN IN NEED' CROSSED OUT
AND 'NUMBERWANG' WRITTEN IN. IT IS FOR THE SUM OF £12.67

HOST

Bad luck Clive – you've been Wanger-numbed. But Ian – you are today's Numberwang. That's all from
Numberwang, but until tomorrow's edition stay Numberwang. Goodnight!

CREDITS ROLL AT SIXTEEN TIMES THE NORMAL SPEED. THEY ARE
MOSTLY THE WORD NUMBERWANG

[POSSIBLY A TITLE BOARD AT THE END WITH TWO DANCING NUMBERS
AND THE WORDS "A NUMBERWANG PRODUCTION" WITH A VOICEOVER OF A VERY OLD
AMERICAN MAN SAYING "THAT'S NUMBERWANG"]

BB

This sketch was very much based on **Countdown**
– there's a numbers board and a Maths-undrum.
The main idea we had was that the phrase "That's
Numberwang!" repeated over and over and
seemingly randomly would be funny, which it turned
out it was. There appear to be rules that it's assumed
everyone knows. The sketch 'world' should have
assumed rules that mean what happens is kind of
normal. So there appear to be rules in **Numberwang**
even though there are of course none!

James Bachman

Co-writer, **Numberwang** sketch



Alongside the clips used in the accompanying lesson plans, there are a host of clips in the BBC comedy archive to help your students understand the mechanics of both stand-up and sketch comedy. There are also examples of how captions can be used to turn an ordinary picture into a comedy gem. The following clips can be found at bbc.co.uk/comedyclassroom under the Secondary tab.

★★★ STAND-UP ★★★

CHARACTERISATION AND PERFORMANCE

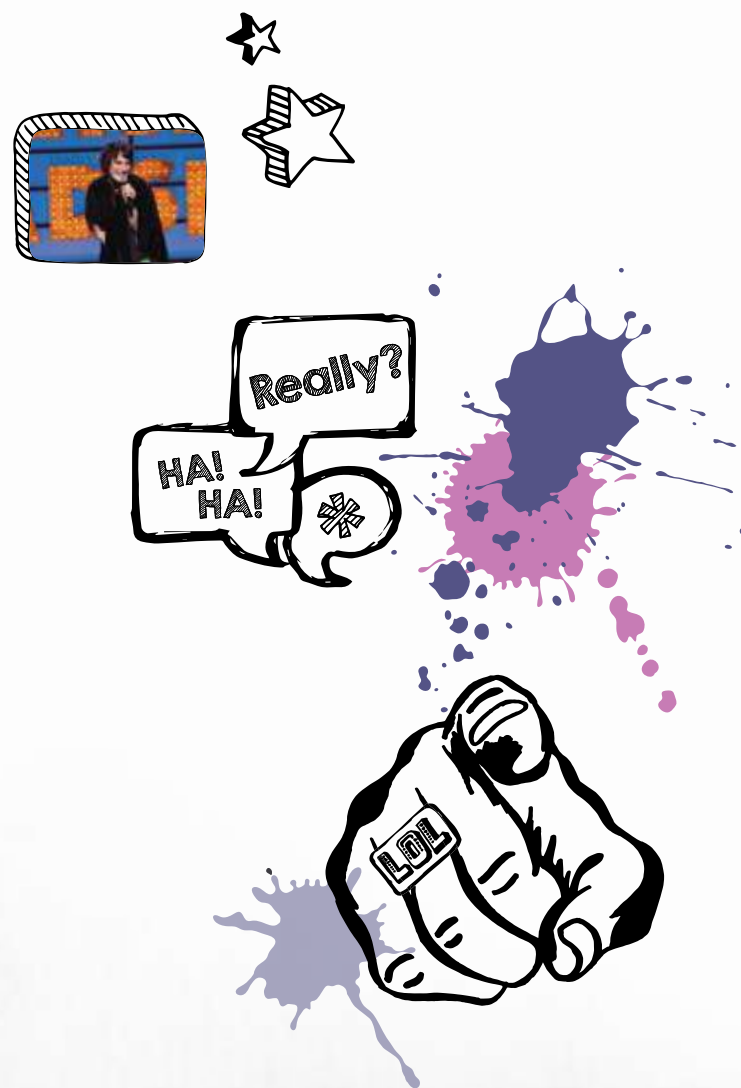
Noel Fielding
Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow, BBC One
Open Mike Productions
Written & Performed by Noel Fielding

SATIRE OF MODERN CELEBRITIES

Katherine Ryan
Live At The Apollo, BBC Two
Open Mike Productions
Written & Performed by Katherine Ryan

OBSERVATIONAL COMEDY

Rhod Gilbert
The Royal Variety Performance 2008, BBC One
BBC Productions
Written & Performed by Rhod Gilbert



★★★ THE SKETCH ★★★

REPETITION AND SPOOF

That Mitchell and Webb Look, BBC Two
BBC Productions
Performed by David Mitchell
Written by David Mitchell and Robert Webb

INVERTING EXPECTATIONS

Goodness Gracious Me, BBC Two
BBC Productions
Written by Richard Pinto and Sharat Sardana
Performed by Sanjeev Bhaskar and Kulvinder Ghir

SPOOF & CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

The Javone Prince Show, BBC Two
BBC Productions
Writing team includes Phil Bowker, Javone Prince, Jon MacQueen, Akemnji Ndifornyan, Samson Kayo and Brian Birigwa.
Performed by Javone Prince, Samson Kayo, Ann Akin and Akemnji Ndifornyan

★★★ CLEVER CAPTIONS ★★★

CAPTION

Have I Got News for You, BBC One
Hat Trick Productions
Writing team includes Kevin Day, Dan Gaster, Ged Parsons, Shaun Pye, Colin Swash and Natt Tapley
Performed by Charlie Brooker and Paul Merton

Due to copyright restrictions, some of the archive clips referred to in this resource may not be available to view on the Comedy Classroom website indefinitely.



Did you know I slept with Mr. Bean aka Rowan Atkinson? It's true. Growing up almost every night I would listen to his comedy while in bed. You have to live and breathe this stuff, let it enter your pores. My top tip for writing and performing comedy is find your favourites and listen, watch, listen, watch, listen and watch and listen again!



Adil Ray

Comedy writer, performer and star of BBC One sitcom *Citizen Khan*