

# HUMOR WRITING: BEHIND THE SCENES

With Dave Fox

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## TIPS FOR BEGINNERS: GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT COMEDY!

- Read, watch, and listen to comedy in multiple genres. You might have a specific format you want to focus on. That's great but also study humor in genres outside of your own: Columns and essays, written fiction, stand-up, sketch comedies, movies and television, etc.
- Find "virtual mentors." Get to know the material of professional humorists who you like, and pay close attention to how they craft their comedy.
- When something makes you laugh, reverse-engineer the joke. Go back and look at how it was set up and *why* you think it's funny. Also critique the joke. Is there a way it could be funnier?
- Read books on how to be funny. Take classes. Find a writing partner, a real-life mentor, or a writing coach who specializes in humor.

## GATHERING IDEAS

- Comedic potential is happening in your life every day. You just need to look for it ... and know where to look for it.
- Conflict is the root of all comedy. Look for different kinds of conflict ... or you can create it (not in reality but in your mind).
  - Things that go wrong.
  - Things that annoy you. (Make a list ... and be on the lookout!)
  - People that annoy you.
  - Things you regret.
    - Also consider things you might regret: What if I did \_\_\_\_\_?
  - Awkward moments.
  - "WTF moments" – Things that surprise you or make you roll your eyes.
- Mine your social media posts for ideas you can develop into bigger stories.
- Keep a list of ideas on your phone or in a pocket-sized notebook. (Don't trust yourself to remember your ideas later! The comedic mind is easily distracted and forgetful!)
- Look for set-ups. Punch lines can come to you later.

## **DEVELOPING YOUR STORY**

### **Follow the “Hero Up a Tree” format:**

- 1) Get your hero up a tree.
- 2) Throw rocks at them.
- 3) Get them down.

### **Beginnings, middles, and endings**

#### **Beginnings**

- Jump right into the conflict or confusion.
- Kill your backstory before it kills your story. If it takes you four paragraphs before you’re at the funny part, throw out those four paragraphs. (If your beginning is boring, you’ll lose your audience.)
- Consider an “*in medias res*” lead. Start with a moment of tension in the middle of the story. Then backtrack to fill in the details.

#### **Middles**

- Build conflict and tension throughout your story and the humor will build.
- When possible, save your funniest anecdotes or situations for later in the tale. Throw your rocks harder as the story progresses.
- Throw away extraneous details that aren’t relevant to the story you are telling.

#### **Endings**

- Is there a lesson (or, in comedy, a fake lesson) you’ve learned?
- Callbacks: Tie your final thought back to something near the beginning of the tale.
- Muse about what might happen in the future. You can resolve the issue at hand but hint there might be more to come. (This is great for ongoing gags in sketch comedy, etc.)

## **EDITING YOUR STORY**

### **Stretch your Silly Putty**

- Exaggerate to make things funnier.
  - Can you make something go “more wrong?”
- Look for funnier examples .
  - What might be funnier than a dog? (A ferret? An iguana? A walrus?)
  - Be specific. Instead of “dog,” say “poodle,” “bulldog,” or “miniature schnauzer.”
- Look for funnier wording.
  - “I got into bed” → “I slithered my way under the covers.”

### **Tightening your story**

- Comb through, sentence by sentence. Shorter phrases will move your stories forward more effectively. Conduct a search-and-destroy mission on unnecessary words, phrases, and details.
- Throw out jokes that disrupt the story's flow – *even if they're funny!* (Try this a few times and you'll see what I mean.)
- Save the funniest element for last – the last phrase in the paragraph, the last word in the sentence, etc.
- Make several editing passes. When you find weak spots, avoid the urge to gloss over them. Are there places you can exaggerate more? Can you concoct more specific examples, find funnier words, etc.?

### **Pacing your story**

- In spoken word and performance comedy (stand-up, sketch-comedy, live storytelling, etc.), inserting a short “comedic pause” before the punch line can build tension for bigger laughs.
- In written comedy, you can create longer pauses with punctuation. Don't be afraid to use fragment sentences, em-dashes, single-word sentences, single-sentence paragraphs, etc.

### ***FINAL THOUGHTS***

- Comedy is everywhere. When look for it, it will find you.
- Being funny is not a “gift.” It's a skill anyone can learn. The more you train, the better you get.
- When things go awry, you might have a brilliant story or joke percolating!

# COMEDIC TECHNIQUES

By Dave Fox – [Globejotting.com](http://Globejotting.com)

There's no cut-and-dry formula to humor. Creating great humor involves a lot of trial and error. Once you identify your set-up, you might have to try several different techniques before you come up with one that works for the punch line. Some techniques work brilliantly in certain situations, and flop in others. If you master a series of techniques though, you'll have a bag of tricks to work from.

Here are some common techniques the pros use:

## PARALLELS

A parallel is a comparison of two unrelated ideas. To come up with a parallel, find one element in the situation that you can generalize about in other ways, and add it into the mix.

I wrote an article about a rat that snuck into an Italian bar and was running amok, I compared the rat getting through the doorway with Italians' love for soccer:

**The image of an Italian crowd standing out in the rain cheering for a rat to get inside a bar made no sense. But there was one thing I was overlooking. Soccer season was finished. An exhausted rat scampering through a doorway was the next best thing to a goal.**

In the above example, I chose Italy. I could have also made other generalizations about Italy and applied them to the rat; for example, I could have also referred to an Italian rat as moving his paws a lot when he talked (as Italians do with their hands), or eating lots of pasta, or wearing a toga as people in ancient Rome did. When looking for parallels, sit and brainstorm as many ideas as you can. You will often come up with lots of mediocre ideas at first. Don't worry; that's part of the process. Eventually, you'll come up with a winner.

## EXAGGERATION

Exaggeration is a simple and effective technique. The more you exaggerate, the more surprising a statement becomes. There are several examples in this paragraph from an article I wrote about meeting a Vancouver rock band at a music festival in Norway:

**Learning that I was from Seattle, the band snuck me into their secret backstage rock-star-only area, with free food and 24-kroner pints of beer. A pint of beer for three US dollars is nothing to shriek about in America, but in Norway, where bars routinely charge 163 US dollars a pint, it's exciting. Furthermore, Norway has a law that if you find pints of beer for 24 kroner, you must drink 112 of them before you are allowed to go to bed. I spent most of July nursing my hangover.**

Beer in Norway is really expensive, but just stating it that way is boring. I exaggerate this reality by claiming that pints of Norwegian beer cost 163 US dollars. Obviously they're not *that* expensive. (They

actually only cost about 68 dollars.) And of course I did not really drink 112 beers. (I passed out after the 90th.) Was I hung over after my night of partying with rock stars? I'll take the fifth amendment here. The point is that as a humor writer, it's okay to stretch the truth (or lie shamelessly) in order to get more laughs. Nobody in real life gets a month-long hangover, but my claim gets more laughs than if I would have just said, "I felt really bad the next day."

### ***"UH-OH" MOMENTS***

On the most basic level, humor involves surprising the audience – throwing something at them that they aren't expecting. You can set up a situation that seems mundane at first. Then surprise your audience with a sudden problem:

**My friend Rhonda was in my den, working on my computer. I was in the kitchen attempting to locate barbecue tongs.... Rhonda glanced up at my cat, who was just sort of hanging out in the living room. Rhonda shrugged. The cat shrugged. They both went back to what they were doing. It was a modern Norman Rockwell kind of a moment. There was just one small problem. I don't own a cat.**

This is from an article about a stray cat that wandered into my condo one evening and made me its slave for the next several weeks. I don't reveal at the beginning of the article that I don't own a cat. This moment when the reader discovers that the cat in my living room is a stray that's wandered in my open door sets the stage for a long string of comedic problems.

### ***FALSEHOODS***

Saying something we know isn't really true is another way of surprising the reader. I used this technique in the same cat article:

**Now, you and I both know the cat did not enter my condo with the specific intent of peeing on the floor. He came in following a different basic instinct: He wanted a beer. And he must have heard me cracking open a bottle of Bass Ale, which led him to enter my abode. Well I don't know about you, but I'm tired of cats always coming to my door begging for beer.**

I came up with this line because I happened to have a beer in my hand when the cat entered. In a way, this paragraph also uses the "parallel" technique. I am combining two unrelated topics: a stray cat has shown up, and I have beer.

The paragraph has two falsehoods: The suggestion that the cat came looking for beer, and my complaint that cats are "always coming to my door begging for beer." (They generally only do this on weekends.)

### ***TAKES OF THREE***

A "take of three" is a list of three things. The first two items establish a direction. The third item goes against that direction and surprises the reader:

**I know... reality television shows are pathetic and I shouldn't watch them in the first place, but keep in mind I could be spending my evenings smoking crack or stealing cars or telemarketing.**

The first two items on the list, smoking crack and stealing cars, are illegal. The reader expects a third illegal element. Instead, I toss in telemarketing (which isn't illegal, though it should be).

### ***U-TURNS***

With a U-turn, you lead the audience in one direction so they get an idea of where a non-humorous statement would be going. Then you say something that contradicts what they are expecting:

**Fortunately, my experience as a tour guide has trained me to act fast in a crisis. So when I saw the smoke, I jumped up and down and screamed a long string of profanities.**

“Acting fast in a crisis” in reality would involve grabbing a fire extinguisher, pulling an alarm, or getting out of the building. Jumping up and down and screaming is clearly not the appropriate thing to do. This part of the sentence surprises the reader.

### ***TWISTED INTERPRETATIONS***

This technique is also sometimes referred to as a “reversal.” Your set-up sentence seems to imply one thing, but actually has a double meaning. Then in the punch line, you interpret the first sentence in a way than you expect your reader to interpret it. My former humor website, for example, had this disclaimer:

**By entering my website, you acknowledge that you do not object to looking at pictures of me naked. If you do object to looking at pictures of me naked, please put some clothes on.**

At first, this disclaimer seems to imply that there are nude pictures of me on my website. (Sorry. There aren't.) The interpretation gets twisted to reveal that it's the reader, not me, who could potentially be naked.

You can also twist interpretations when answering questions:

**Q: Where were you born?**

**A: In an elevator.**

**Q: Where did you grow up?**

**A: I didn't**

In both of these questions, the person asking is expecting a response like “Seattle” or “the United States. You can reinterpret the question to come up with a response that is either more specific or more general than is intended.

## ***SUPERIORITY***

People like to feel superior. Making them feel superior – usually by putting someone else down – brings laughs. Sadly, this is why ethnic jokes are so common. Be careful how you use this technique. The wrong context can offend people beyond your intentions. Superiority is also a common technique in political jokes. Again, these jokes can offend people of one political persuasion or another – but if you are in a room full of like-minded thinkers, the technique works well.

During the first Gulf War, a (thankfully short-lived) trend in television news was to put not one but multiple news tickers on the screen at the same time – as if people could read and absorb four “breaking news” stories at the same time. An ABC News spokesman and a Fox News anchor got in a spat over whether or not it was a good idea to throw so many headlines in people’s faces at the same time. The Fox anchor ridiculed ABC, stating, “We think our audience is smart enough to consume two bits of information at a time – unlike what other news organizations think of their viewers.”

Politics aside, Fox had a lot of sensationalist, non-news programming at the time. I came to ABC’s defense and slammed Fox:

**Yes, the network that brought us "When Animals Attack," "World's Scariest Explosions," and "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire" is defending the intelligence of its viewers.**

I also used this technique in my above quip about how telemarketing should be a felony. Most people hate telemarketers, so they are generally a safe group to slam. (If you happen to be a telemarketer, please just ignore that last comment.)

## ***SELF-DEPRECATATION***

A safer way to go for laughs by making other people feel superior is to make yourself the target. You don’t risk offending anybody, and you endear yourself to your readers. Situations in which you find yourself feeling confused can make for great self-deprecation articles. Here’s an excerpt from a column I wrote about trying to help an Irish farmer catch his runaway sheep:

**Having grown up near Washington, DC, I sadly never received my sheep herding license and had no clue what this farmer wanted me to do with his sheep.... By this point, the farmer and the sheep had both passed me on the road. The farmer had overtaken the sheep and was flailing his arms, trying to scare the animal back up the hill toward me. "Don't move!" he yelled at me.**

**The sheep ran toward me. I moved.**

The article is about my ineptness in sheep herding. I ridicule myself, and nobody else gets hurt. I am willing to bet that most of my readers would have been as intimidated by the angry sheep as I was. But by making myself the fool, the readers gain a sense of superiority.

## **FALSE BRAVADO**

This is the opposite of self-deprecation. You brag about yourself or your abilities in a way that you don't really mean. Use this technique carefully! If your irony doesn't come through, you end up looking like an arrogant jerk. Be sure your tone is clearly sarcastic. I take on a sarcastically arrogant tone in my opening paragraph about an article in People magazine:

**Well... once again this year, I have been totally ignored on People Magazine's list of the Top 50 Most Beautiful People. It's little injustices like this that make me glad I'm leaving the country.**

My suggestion that I should have been considered for this list is absurd enough that people know I'm joking.

## **REPETITION**

If you've come up with something funny as you write, you can make it an ongoing joke by referring back to it in different ways. The laughter grows with each repetition. This is a favorite technique among sitcom writers. For example, in the classic "Soup Nazi" episode of Seinfeld, it's funny when the man selling the soup refuses to serve customers the first time with the line, "No soup for you!" As the plot develops and more customers have trouble ordering soup, the line gets bigger laughs with every repetition.

Repetition sometimes extends beyond a single essay or sitcom episode. For example, Bart Simpson's famous lines, "Eat my shorts" and "Don't have a cow" show up in multiple Simpson's episodes. Steve Martin's "wild and crazy guy" line when he used to appear on Saturday Night Live, and Joan Rivers's trademark question, "Can we talk?" are other examples.

## **CALLBACKS**

A callback is a special kind of repetition. With a callback, you refer to something early in an essay or script. You continue on with your theme for long enough that the reader has forgotten the initial reference. Then, near the end, you refer back to it.

I used this technique in an article about missing vials of Bubonic Plague virus. I start the article this way:

**Officials say there's no need to panic. The vials of Bubonic Plague virus reported missing from a research lab refrigerator have in fact been destroyed, and we can now go back to worrying about all the other stuff we worry about, such as impending nuclear doom and why we must be subjected to another season of "American Idol."**

The essay develops, exploring the dangers of the virus and questioning why it's being kept in university refrigerators. The reader forgets all about my "American Idol" slam until I "call it back" in the very last paragraph:



**Instead of destroying the Plague bacteria and making the scientists fill out lengthy forms, I have another idea for what to do with the bacteria. I can't tell you exactly what it is, but it involves the producers of "American Idol."**

Callbacks are a great way to end a humor essay or comedy sketch because they tie everything together and bring the reader full-circle. If you are struggling for an ending, look back at what you have written so far and try to find an element you can call back in the conclusion.

# ***HUMOR WRITING MASTERCLASS!***

*MONDAYS: MAY 2 TO JUNE 12*

If you've enjoyed today's workshop and you'd like to learn more, I'd love for you to join me in a **six-week humor writing masterclass**. You'll discover the techniques the pros use to create consistently funny material, and learn how to make people laugh so hard that milk comes out of their nose ... even when they're not drinking milk!

Our focus will be on writing humor columns and personal essays but if there's a different genre you're interested in working in, please let me know. Humorists in all genres are welcome.

Our group of six to eight aspiring humor writers will meet on Zoom from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Pacific Time / 9 to 10:30 p.m. Eastern Time – for six weeks from Monday, May 1 to June 12. **(No class on Memorial Day, May 29.)**

The workshop will include two detailed story critiques designed not only to improve the articles at hand, but to also elevate your overall humor skills. You'll also be encouraged to offer feedback for your fellow students – which is a great way to boost your own skills. (We will give and receive feedback in an honest but encouraging and constructive way. Our goal is to make each other laugh, not cry.)

**The cost of this six-week workshop is US \$289. Sign up by April 15 and get a \$30 discount! Space is limited and will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.**

(And hey ... if you're interested but this time of day doesn't work for you, please let me know. I coach writers in lots of different time zones and will be happy to add a second workshop at a different time if there's enough interest.)

To sign up or find out more, drop me an email at [dave@globejotting.com](mailto:dave@globejotting.com).

## ***PERSONALIZED COACHING***

I'm not just a writing and humor coach. I'm also a certified life coach who specializes in helping people achieve their creative goals. If you'd like to talk with me one-on-one about the writing and/or comedy craft, or you need help defining and realizing your creative goals, I can help!

I coach writers and other creative people all over the world via Zoom, Skype, and email. To learn more about my services, visit [globejotting.com/coaching](http://globejotting.com/coaching) – or email me at [dave@globejotting.com](mailto:dave@globejotting.com).

Mention that you participated in the “Thinking Funny” conference and I'll knock an extra ten bucks off the already-discounted introductory session price. You'll pay just \$40 for your first hour of coaching.

# LOW-COST, DO-IT-YOURSELF WRITING WORKSHOPS

On a tight budget? Hey, I get it! If my masterclasses and individualized coaching are beyond your budget, I've also got six low-cost, do-it-yourself courses on Udemy.com. These fun and informative video workshops include all of the same info I include in my live masterclasses, at a much lower price.

(What they don't include is the individualized critiquing and coaching, but hey ... they're *cheap*!)

**I'm offering special discounts for everyone who participated in the Thinking Funny Workshop. You can grab all six of these courses for the lowest price Udemy will let me sell them – a measly \$10.99 or less per course!**

To sign up, or to check out full course descriptions and free sample lessons, follow the links below. They'll insert the discount codes for you automatically. **Sign up soon! These discount codes expire this coming Tuesday, April 4.**

- [Humor Writing: How to Write, Think, Speak, and Be Funnier](#) (\$10.99)
- [Personal Travel Journaling: How to Write Extraordinary Travel Diaries](#) (\$9.99)
- [Travel Writing: Explore the World and Publish Your Stories](#) (\$10.99)
- [Overcome Writer's Block and Write with Confidence](#) (\$9.99)
- [Write More! Time and Distraction Management for Writers](#) (\$10.99)
- [Deep Travel: Have Adventures No Guidebook Can Tell You About](#) (\$9.99)

(If you miss the April 4 deadline, you will find other discount coupons for just a few dollars more at [globejotting.com/sale](http://globejotting.com/sale).)

## FIND ME ONLINE!

My [Globejotting.com](http://Globejotting.com) website has lots of my travel and humor writing, plus information on my live, online workshops; my low-cost Udemy courses; my books, and more.

You'll also find me on social media at:

- [Facebook.com/globejotting](https://Facebook.com/globejotting)
- [Instagram.com/globejotting](https://Instagram.com/globejotting)
- [Youtube.com/globejotting](https://Youtube.com/globejotting)
- [Twitter.com/globejotter](https://Twitter.com/globejotter) ← (Please note that on Twitter, it's @globejotter, not @globejotting.)

Got questions, comments, or a goofy story to tell? Drop me an email at [dave@globejotting.com](mailto:dave@globejotting.com).

# BOOKS BY DAVE FOX

## **GETTING LOST: MISHAPS OF AN ACCIDENTAL NOMAD**

When you travel, things go wrong. That might not sound like uplifting advice, but in this hilarious collection of stories about mishaps in faraway places, award-winning humorist Dave Fox proves otherwise. At age eight, Dave moves to England and nearly starts a riot in Northern Africa. As a nerdy teenager, he inadvertently smuggles illegal radio equipment into Finland on his way to spending a year in Norway. In his college days, he discovers it is not wise to seek inner peace inside an Icelandic volcano; narrowly misses being stripped, gassed, and robbed (at least in his own head) on an overnight train through Italy; and finds himself surrounded by machine gun-toting cops in Greece.

*Getting Lost: Mishaps of an Accidental Nomad* spans 30 years of foreign travel adventures and misadventures, from Dave's year as a British school boy, to his teenage days as a foreign exchange student to his so-called adult life as a professional traveler. He weaves together tales both poignant and amusing in this memoir of a travel-obsessed geek.

- [Buy on Amazon Kindle](#) (\$6.99)
- [Order the Paperback](#) (\$16.99)

## **GLOBEJOTTING HOW TO WRITE EXTRAORDINARY TRAVEL JOURNALS (AND STILL HAVE TIME TO ENJOY YOUR TRIP!)**

Most travel diaries fizzle. By day six of a big trip, people are struggling to recall what happened on days three, four, and five. They return home with mostly empty journals, or bland writing that fails to capture the full spirit of their journeys. Award-winning travel humorist Dave Fox comes to the rescue in this book that's both informative and irreverently funny. You'll learn to:

- Bring destinations to life with bold details.
- Splash those details quickly onto your pages so journaling doesn't gobble up your precious vacation time.
- Elude your Inner Censor and write with confidence.
- Weave together your outer and inner journeys, using travel as a backdrop for self-discovery.

Dave shares his favorite journaling techniques, shows how to find time to write in the middle of an exciting trip, and infuses it all with a generous dose of his off-the-wall humor. Whether your journeys are weekend road trips or excursions around the world, this book will help transform you into a travel journaling superhero!

- [Buy on Amazon Kindle](#) (\$7.99)
- [Order the Paperback](#) (\$14.99)