

2nd edition

# COMEDY WRITING s e c r e t s

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the best-selling book on  
how to think funny, write funny,  
act funny, and get paid for it



**Mel Helitzer**  
with Mark Shatz

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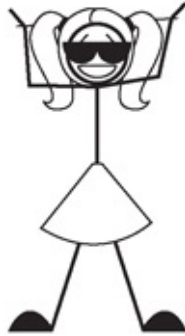
# A MAGNUS HOPUS

## Dedication

To Linea Warmke

and to

Ethan, his parents' favorite comic.







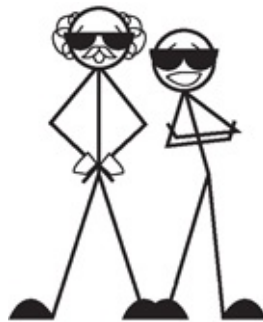
# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**MEL HELITZER**, a former Clio award-winning Madison Avenue ad agency president, is now a distinguished, award-winning journalism professor at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. He was one of the first to teach humor writing at any university in the world. His course led to the publication of *Comedy Writing Secrets* in 1987, and the book is now the largest selling text on humor writing in the country.

Helitzer has written humor for print and broadcast productions as well as comedy material for such stars as Sammy Davis, Jr., Shari Lewis, Art Linkletter, Ernie Kovacs, and presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson. Many of his students are now professional comedians or humor writers for national publications. He is the author of seven books, including a bound-for-Broadway musical, *Oh, Jackie! Her Father's Story*.

**MARK A. SHATZ** is professor of psychology at Ohio University, Zanesville. In addition to teaching humor writing, he has extensive international experience as a teacher, speaker, and seminar leader on various topics such as motivation, death education, and interpersonal communication. Dr. Shatz has published numerous academic papers, including how to use humor to enhance instruction and learning. He is the author of *KISSing Golf: The Keep It Simple (Stupid) Instructional Method*, a humorous instructional book for beginning golfers.



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# FOREWORD

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## And Now a Word From the Prof

Comedy is a lot like professional sports. Past successes are history. You get paid for today's hits. One difference is that in baseball, a .300 hitter gets paid a million dollars and the fans are deliriously happy all season. But a .300 batting average in comedy would get professional performers to go from boos to booze in a week.

With that kind of failure rate, you'd think any person who had reached the age of reason would take up plumbing. But the facts are that writing and performing humor is rising in popularity. And if you're successful, the money in comedy is so abundant that professional practitioners are like well-endowed actors in a porn movie — “You mean I get paid for doing that.”

The biggest change in the humor industry in the last ten years has been the need for professional writers. There are just not enough qualified writers today to fill the increasing need. Besides the standard venues, more and more markets are begging for humor material: speeches, business newsletters, advertising, columns, talk shows, sales presentations, and everything from high-tech computer attachments to *Hi, Mom* greeting cards.

Comedy clubs had a ten-year fireworks display. While the worst ones closed from bad management and bad acts, the remainder are solid businesses, and the “I'll do anything to get on stage” neophytes are now secure enough to be unionized.



TV sitcoms also had their vicissitudes of popularity. The great ones lasted into syndication, and the worst ones were pulled after one or two seasons. In the meantime, the number of humor talk shows from Leno and Letterman to Jon Stewart and Conan O'Brien increased. And now every presidential candidate needs to make a guest appearance, not only to be toasted but also to increase his popularity by being roasted.

The formal study of humor in colleges has grown in geometric proportions despite the doubting colleagues who associate facetiousness with frivolity. The president of my university once told me he disdained humor, because he feared failure. “I've heard some of your speeches,” I told him. “And I agree with you.”

It's the fear of failure, however, that continues to be the biggest drawback. While 90 percent

of us claim we have a sense of humor, the number of critics is 100 percent. "I didn't think it was funny." Go argue.

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Milton Berle ended his years appearing before senior citizens in Miami Beach. Once, a little old lady in the front row kept shouting, "That stinks. I've heard it before."

Exasperated, Berle said, "Lady, do you know who I am?"

"No," she said, "but if you'll go up to the desk, they'll tell you."

The net result of all this is that if you really want to take the time and effort to learn how to write (and perform) humor, you've got to have a thick skin to go along with a nimble brain. Learn how to live with people throwing dirt at you.

One day a donkey fell into a well. The farmer couldn't get him out, so he knew he had to cover him up. He called in his neighbors, and they all started to throw dirt down the well, but instead of burying the animal, the donkey would shake the dirt off and take a step up. Pretty soon, the pile of dirt got so high that the donkey stepped over the edge of the well. Moralists use this story to preach that all our troubles can be stepping stones, that we shouldn't give up instead shake it off and take a step up. Comedians, however, note that as soon as the disdained donkey got to the top he ran over and bit the farmer. Their moral is that if something goes wrong, try to cover your ass. It can come back and bite you.

We hope you'll enjoy this book. It can make you rich in more ways than one. And that's no joke.

**Professor Mel Helitzer** Ohio University 2005





# INTRODUCTION

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## You Can Do It!

**HEY! IS THIS THING ON?**



Out of fear that discovery of their superficial tricks will be evaluated rather than laughed at, many famous humorists have sponsored an insupportable fiction that comedians must be born funny. According to Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, for example, you can't teach anyone to be funny. They either have the gift or they don't. Hogwash!

You can teach literate people anything, from Einstein's theory of relativity to how to play shortstop. And compared to humor writing secrets, playing the piano's eighty-eight keys or speaking Greek is a lot harder to learn and a lot less fun. (Which is more beneficial to humanity is debatable.) What is universally accepted, however, is that comedy, a flash of intuition, is more art than science.

Since Eve first admonished her pooped-out partner to be "up and Adam," entertainment has been our kingdom's social pastime, and comedy is the coin of the realm. Theater traditionalists like to point out that one side of their coin is the embossed mask of humor, and the other side, the mask of tragedy. They're wrong again. Humor is tragedy and tragedy is humor. As Mel Brooks once said, "Tragedy is if I cut my finger. Comedy is if you drop into an open sewer and die." As this book will prove, if you can't learn to write humor, kid, that's tragedy!

### **HOW THIS BOOK HELPS YOU**

Humor style changes dramatically almost every twenty years. This new edition of *Comedy Writing Secrets* has been updated with contemporary methods and formulas. Here are some of the key points the book covers:

- The three Rs of humor
- The secret of the MAP theory
- The beauty of *What if?*

- The THREES theory of humor structure
- 
- Why we laugh at some forms of humor and groan at others
  - The natural hostility of humor
  - Why humor must ridicule a target
  - Why hard-core humor is more shock than funny

The book is divided into three sections. The first part covers the foundations of humor writing including the theories and principles of humor and why we laugh. The second section describes various humor-writing techniques, such as plays on words, reverses, pairings, triples, and exaggeration. The final section explains how to write humor for popular markets such as greeting cards, speeches, articles, newsletters, and stand-up comedy. This revised edition also includes chapters on humor writing in advertising and the use of humor in education.

Integrated throughout the book are sections titled Showtimes that provide quick exercises that can refine your writing skills. Humor writing demands practice, and it is critical to take the time to complete these writing assignments. If you're not funny by then, demand your money back and don't ever get married.

While this book is an introduction to humor writing, we don't promise it will instantly transform you into a professional. Learning the fundamentals of humor is easy compared with the dedication required to be a successful writer. A woman once rushed up to the famous violinist Fritz Kreisler and cried, "I'd give my life to play as beautifully as you do."

Kreisler replied, "Well, I did."

## **NO DEGREE REQUIRED**

Since there is no official humor certification organization, there is no such thing as a certified professional humor writer. If you can sell your material or get paid for performing it, you're a professional. But humor writing is commanding more and more attention in higher education.

Approximately sixty universities, including the University of California, Los Angeles, and The New School in New York, offer humor-writing courses and degree-granting programs in humor studies, and more such courses are on the horizon. Many colleges use this book as their primary text.

The first college credit writing course was taught by Mel Helitzer at the Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University in 1980. Within three years, it had become such a smash hit that the twenty allotted seats were assigned a year in advance. Students for the class are as diverse today as they were more than twenty years ago and range from fellow faculty members to adults from the community — including lawyers, doctors, accountants, homemakers, and even one mortician. (We asked him if, when trying out his material, he

killed the audience, and he said, “No, they're already dead when I get there.”)

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The largest group of current comedy writers for major TV shows and films comes from Harvard, which ironically does not have a humor-writing course. For some reason, there has never been a famous comedian who graduated from Yale or Princeton, that is if you don't count two recent U.S. presidents.

In Chicago, Second City is the country's leading school for improvisational training. Numerous comedy clubs and individual professional writers, particularly in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, offer small clinics.

## **THE BIG-PICTURE BENEFITS OF HUMOR**

Humor's impact is far reaching. For example, when the editors of *Fortune Magazine* queried human resource directors of Fortune 500 companies as to what qualifications they looked for in middle management executives, the top three answers were: (1) knowledge of the product; (2) respect for the bottom line; and (3) a sense of humor.

Since everyone claims to have a sense of humor, except for an expectant mother in a delivery room, the editors double-checked, “Why a sense of humor?” And the replies were consistent.

A sense of humor indicates leadership. When we smile, it's a sign of confidence, because fear and paranoia are signaled by frowns, not smiles. Subordinates, associates, customers, and clients like to work with someone with a sense of humor.

## **JOINED AT THE LIP: HUMOR AND COMEDY**

Academicians, especially English professors, often attempt to draw distinctions between humor and comedy. Humor is considered the broader term that encompasses all types of humor material, such as satire, sarcasm, irony, and parody. Comedy is the performance of humor. The perception is that clever writers write humor while glib comedians do jokes.



Men say the most important thing in another person is a sense of humor. That means they're looking for someone to laugh at their jokes.

— **Sheila Wenz**


It's true that jokes in isolation are just that — jokes. However, any form of humor writing uses jokes to produce the humor. We take a less elitist position and do not make arbitrary distinctions between humor and comedy. If the result is laughter, then the label is insignificant. Our goal is to help you write funny.

## **WHOSE JOKE IS IT, ANYWAY?**


Contemporary humor-writing methods are an extension of past techniques. We focus on

contemporary humorists, but since today's comedians rip off the greats, knowledge of humor history is not a sometime thing. This book, therefore, includes examples and advice from scores of contemporary comedians such as Jon Stewart, Tina Fey, Billy Crystal, Jay Leno, Chris Rock, David Letterman, Robin Williams, and Rita Rudner, and from humor hall of famers such as Erma Bombeck, Milton Berle, and George Burns, and even from such early American humorists as Mark Twain, Elbert Hubbard, and John Morley.

Unfortunately, credit lines for humor are a researcher's nightmare, like this pairing.

 If you can't join them, beat them.

— **Mort Sahl**

 If you can't beat them, arrange to have them beaten.

— **George Carlin**

There are many standard jokes, and they have thousands of variations. No one can swear that any one was his creation. In *Oh, the Things I Know!*, Al Franken stated, "I am not a member of any organized religion. I am a Jew." Franken later noted that he "first heard that joke from a Catholic, who had substituted the word 'Catholic.'" Will Rogers used that same premise — but he substituted the words "political party" and "Democrat" — nearly one hundred years ago.

It's also been proven that such famous lines as Horace Greeley's "Go west, young man," Marie Antoinette's "Let them eat cake," Joseph Addison's "He who hesitates is lost," W.C. Fields's "Any man who hates dogs and babies can't be all bad," and his oft-quoted tombstone inscription, "I would rather be here than in Philadelphia," Mark Twain's "Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it," Will Rogers's "I never met a man I didn't like" and Franklin D. Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," were all previously written by someone else.

If scholars have this problem with historic lines, then giving proper credit for similar jokes, anecdotes, and witticisms can be a never-ending dilemma. So the best we can offer for identification is to list the name that was published in someone's joke collection, but don't bet on its accuracy. Of course, some jokes came to us creditless, and some we wrote ourselves. The ghost of Marlowe will always haunt the library of Shakespeare — and that's not an original line either.

Now, let's get started.



# **The Basics of Humor Writing**

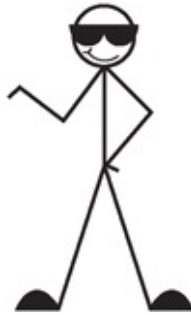


# The Importance of Humor Writing



What is comedy? Comedy is the art of making people laugh without making them puke.

— **Steve Martin**



Humor has tremendous value. It's an art form. But it's not a mystery — it has structure and formula. You can learn this creative art for your own personal enjoyment or for financial gain.

Admittedly, some widely known authors feel that humor-writing skills (let alone the sense of humor) are mystically inherited rather than learned, and likely molded by such factors as ethnic characteristics, early childhood maternal influence, and insecurity.

 Humor is one of the things in life which defies analysis — either you have it or you don't, either you enjoy it or you don't.

— **Ross Mackenzie**

Nobody can teach you humor writing. The secret is passed on from one generation to another, and I will not tell mine, except to my son.

— **Art Buchwald**

But the truth is that anyone can learn to write humor. Although some individuals are naturally funnier than others, just as some individuals are more athletic or more musically gifted, humor writing can be taught and humor-writing skills can be acquired. Humor is not a mystery, because (like stage magic) it is possible to demystify it.

## **BUT I AIN'T FUNNY**

Let's use a simple humor exercise to illustrate that humor writing is accessible to everyone. Consider the possible uses of two round bar stool cushions. Other than stool cushions, what can they be? For five minutes, use your imagination and plenty of exaggeration. Without being



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