

CHAPTER 5

Animation Comedy and Gag Writing

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WHAT MAKES YOU LAUGH?

What makes you laugh? Or, more importantly, what makes your audience laugh? “Why does Brutus the Brave refuse to cross the road?” “Because he’s no chicken!” Humor varies from culture to culture and from age to age. In comedy we set up a situation, increase the tension, and suddenly we’re stopped dead by something unexpected. Emotion gushes out, tension is relieved and exploded into laughter. At least that’s the way it’s supposed to work. And it *will* work if you set up the gag right. Comedy is a contrast between two individually consistent but forever incongruous frames of reference linked in an unexpected and sudden way. A stereotype is twisted. You lead the audience down the garden path (the setup) and then—zap! Surprise is very important. Generally the bigger the surprise, the bigger the belly laughs. Two classic baby jokes, peek-a-boo and the jack-in-the-box, demonstrate at an early age what makes us laugh. There’s the buildup, the expectation, then the pop or shock.

Some forms of comedy, like satire, don’t rely on a single effect but a series of minor explosions or a continuous state of mild amusement. A running gag gets funnier with each repetition. Think of *the Road Runner* series, one long running gag.

Experts believe that all comedy contains an impulse of aggression or fear. The fear may be combined with affection, as it is when we tease. It’s this fear or aggression that’s released when we laugh. Shock works well. Repression can contribute to a bigger laugh. Repression is the reason that gross-out and bathroom humor get belly laughs. The energy of the comedy is important. Whether a situation is tragic or funny depends on the audience’s attitude, whether that attitude is dominated by pity or animosity. Who is slipping on the ice? Is it the sweet, little old lady or the school bully? If it’s the little old lady, the two frames of reference remain juxtaposed. We’re apt to feel sorry for her. But if it’s the bully,

the two frames of reference collide, and we laugh. The experts claim that kids naturally laugh at cruelty and boasting. They laugh when a hoax is played or when others are in some way made uncomfortable. A witty remark may go over their heads. Of course, in children's media we need to consider good taste and good role models as well and use common sense in what we want children to see. Humor for kids is politically correct, but that does not mean it's boring!

ANIMATION COMEDY

How is animation comedy different? It's above all visual with plenty of sight gags. The very basis of your idea must be visual. Animation uses motion and misuses the laws of physics. Timing is important. The comedy is exaggerated, often taking reality one step beyond. It may be illogical. There might be a use of fantasy, occasionally with musical numbers and dances. Dialogue may be "smart" with comebacks, put-downs, puns, rhymes, or alliteration. Titles are funny. Names of people, places, and things are funny. Most executives that buy or approve stories prefer material that will make both the kids and the adults that could be watching with them laugh. Of course, this means higher ratings and higher box office receipts. However, a few executives prefer the comedy material to be specific to a single age group. So you must find out what the executives who are going to approve your material want. Never write down to the kids!

COMEDY OUT OF A CHARACTER'S PERSONALITY

The funniest comedy develops out of a character's personality. Take a classic character type and twist it. What makes your unique character naturally funny? Use a character's attitude, mannerisms, and dialogue to increase the comedy. Reactions and comedy takes can often be funnier than the gag that has gone before. You might also play against character type or expectation for your humor: a rough and tough dog that cringes at the sight of a bug. Exaggerate appearance, diction, behavior, and attitude. Act out your scenes as you write. How would that action really happen? How would you feel if you were that character? How can you exaggerate and make it funnier? Spend some time developing comedy and gags from the personalities of your characters. Good characters and the comedy that their relationships can provide is the best recipe for a classic script. Characters with a comic defect and fish-out-of-water characters are types that work well for comedy. Use characters as different from each other as possible so that these conflicting personalities can bounce off of each other in a funny way.

WRITING A FUNNY TELEVISION SCRIPT

Start by putting yourself in the mood to *think* funny! Then begin to analyze. Where does the humor of this series originate? Is it belly laughs, giggles, or smiles? Is there visual humor or funny, smart dialogue? What's funny about the star's personality? Be consistent to the kind and amount of humor of that show.

Combine people, places, and props, juxtaposing one idea with a totally different one (an angry man and an office cooler in the middle of the desert). Place the unexpected in a surprising context. Place the obvious where the viewer would least expect it. Place incongruous words or things in juxtaposition to create surprising relationships. Make sure that your script is sprinkled with spot gags throughout. Come up with a script that's funny and fresh, or at least put a new twist onto a classic idea.

Try creating an episode around a funny situation: perhaps the fish-out-of-water or an unresolved predicament (like a lie or a secret). You can give your star a tough choice between two good things or two that are bad. Often there's a catalyst that rocks the boat. The star may make a plan, but it turns into a textbook case of Murphy's Law, and everything that can go wrong does. Complicate the predicament your star finds herself in by adding additional layers of problems. Escalate the trouble so that she digs herself in deeper and deeper. Maybe there's a race against time with your star in really big trouble if her parents come home early or if she doesn't get something fixed before they find out what she did. Or maybe your star is trapped somewhere embarrassing.

Be sure you have plenty of props available because these are necessary for the gags. Misuse your props. Make up your own wild gadgets.

Set up your gags with the basic information of the joke. You might intentionally mislead your audience in the setup with false clues. A beat or two of complications or incongruity adds tension, but keep the setup short. Exaggerate everything. Build your gags, **milk** them, and top them. Add a **capper**. Comedy is a process of setup and **payoff**, and this is often done in a rhythm of three...dum, dum, de-dum! Setup, setup, payoff! Sometimes you can set up now and pay off later with the **punch line**. You may have multiple punch lines, each one funnier than the one before. Friz Freleng often timed his animation to the beat of a metronome. He'd get a rhythm going and then break it for the surprise. Get a feel for the timing, and work on your gag until it feels right.

Getting the laugh often depends on using the right words in exactly the right order. If something isn't funny enough, try adding C's and K's to the dialogue. These sounds are funnier!

Use timing, tension, and hints, letting your audience bring a little to the whole and bridging the gap. Use simplification and selection. Give the audience A, B, C and F, G. The audience should have to supply D and E. Use implicit, not explicit, punch lines. Instead of saying, "Miss Petunia eats like a pig!" you want to say, "Miss Petunia is invited to lunch. Should I get out our best trough?" Don't tip off the surprise—the punch line—but save it for the end. Save the biggest, wildest, and best gag for the climax. Scenes usually go out on a laugh line, a **stinger**, or a **button**. End your script with a twist!

Get feedback on your gags from story editors or trusted friends. Listen with an open mind, and don't get defensive. Try to put the script away for a couple

of days; then look at it with a fresh point of view, consider the suggestions carefully, and do your rewrite. If something bothers you even a little, then it's not right. Fix it! Turn in your very best work.

PUTTING TOGETHER COMEDY SCRIPTS

Established writers have several theories for putting together comedy scripts. Some believe that comedy plots need to be simple to have the room to make the story funny. They like to focus on doing comedy riffs around a basic subject. This works best on short cartoons, where a complicated plot isn't necessary to hold the viewer's interest. Some writers like to use the leapfrog method (a story-developing scene, then a comedy scene, then a story-developing scene...all the way through). Even action scripts in cartoons usually have some comedy scenes. These scenes are used to break up the tension from the intense action. After all, this method was good enough for Shakespeare. In a longer story with more depth, consider the effect of tension and when you want it released. Tension built up in a mystery can be released in a good comedy scene. But if you want the tension built up for the climax, perhaps you don't want a comedy scene immediately prior to that climax. Most writers just use their judgment on what will work best for the length and depth of the story they're writing.

COMEDY DEVICES

Cartoon gags have an old history with roots in vaudeville and magazine cartoons, as well as comic books and silent films. Here are a few comedy devices that you can use in writing gags:

Old Gags

Don't be afraid to take an old gag and update it with a twist.

Impersonation/Disguise

A character in costume or drag. This is great for kids' cartoons. Children like this best when the character is embarrassed by the disguise.

Multiple Personalities or Role Reversal

These devices allow characters to do things that they wouldn't normally do.

- For multiple personalities: A witch places a spell over a rabbit, and the rabbit changes into a flamboyant frog, then an unlikely looking prince, then a meek but gigantic lion.
- In role reversal: A normally responsible girl pretends to be flighty in order to attract the attention of the football captain.

Anthropomorphism

Like impersonation and role reversal, you have two forms of reference, and you oscillate between them. *Scooby-Doo*

Multiple Reference

Two or more frames of reference in one gag or joke. "His mom repaired the microwave with extra parts from an old jet. Now when she opens the oven, the bagel circles the table twice before coming in for a blue-plate landing."

Pretense and Exposure

Pretending to be someone the character is not, hypocrisy unmasked. Pretense usually involves character mannerisms and business, perhaps a change in voice. *The Emperor's New Clothes*

Reactions and Takes

These are usually used in an ending to a gag, rather than as gags themselves. They rely on funny expressions, reactions, or a funny take, even a double take. The character is often left in a funny pose, perhaps with something on top of his head.

Pull Back and Reveal

The basic gag element is at first hidden from the audience. We see a tic-tac-toe game in progress. We pull back to see that the game is being played by two very dignified scientists in the middle of a dry erase board covered with complicated, mathematical formulas.

Hidden Element

The gag element is hidden from one of the characters.

Twist Around

Things are the opposite of what we expect. *Alice in Wonderland/Through the Looking Glass*. The twist might be in the dialogue: "That teacher's so mean that when a pit bull sees her, he runs for his blankie." Or the gag could be visual: At a spa snooty pigs, dressed to kill, are taking a tour. They turn up their noses as they watch people wallow in mud baths.

Misunderstanding

Old is mistaken for young, man for woman, and so on. Sitcoms use this technique often. The teacher says to the principal, "I won't put up with those

pests!" In the next scene we see a classroom of kids waiting for their teacher. Instead...in walks the pest control man!

Twisted Clichés

Take a cliché and twist it.

- Twisted—a visual twist is part of the cliché gag. "They're playing our song!" We see performing birds ringing bells as they peck out a once-romantic ballad.
- Turnabout cliché—one important word is changed. Two kids at recess are fighting. One says, "She called me a dirty number."
- Literal cliché—The gag centers on a word in the cliché that has more than one meaning. We use the wrong one. "One pitcher is worth a thousand words."
- Cliché visual—A new gag is made out of a cliché picture. Uncle Sam is pointing his finger. We pull back to see Uncle Sam's son, looking defiant. Uncle Sam says, "You pick up your toys before you watch the fireworks!"

Customs

The juxtaposition of references from two different occupations, ethnic customs, or time periods. *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*

Pop-Culture References

Shared cultural experiences. *Shrek*

Topical Humor

Jokes based on the news of the day or time period. You can use any old joke and bring it up to date. Topical humor is harder to use in animation because of the extensive lead-in time until the television show or film is shown. Also, topical humor may be dated by the time a show is rerun or released on DVD. *The Simpsons*, *South Park*

The "In" Joke

"In" and upscale. "In Beverly Hills 911 is unlisted."

The Dumb Joke (usually a belly laugh)

Blonde jokes, women driver jokes

Kid's Mistakes

Not always funny to kids. This is hard to use in kids' cartoons unless the joke involves a younger brother, sister, tagalong, or (in the same vein) a pet. *Bill Cosby's Kids Say the Darnedest Things*