

TIPS for Writing Comedy

- Comedy is notoriously subjective. The best thing to do is write what makes YOU laugh. The script will find its audience if it finds its way into the hands of a producer or executive who shares your sense of humour.
- Avoid too many "jokes." Writing a comedy is a very specific exercise in genre, but at its heart it is no different than writing drama, horror, action, or any other mode of narrative. The key is to define your premise with the utmost specificity and to know your core characters inside and out. According to Mike Werb (screenwriter of *The Mask*), "the more you know your characters, regardless of genre, the more you can pit them against something unexpected, which can lead to high tension [and conflict], whether [it be] dramatic or comedic." There is often a tendency to frontload and overload comedies with jokes, but the best comedies have elements of drama and, conversely, the best dramas often have moments of levity. Jokes, bits and gags are important, but as comedy screenwriting guru Steve Kaplan points out, they are surface elements of your script, not the spine: "Jokes constantly have to land, but there have to be comic characters that work to hang them on, because jokes are subjective." In other words, you can't ensure that every joke you write will play for everyone, but you can have more control over how your characters impact and appeal to viewers. Great characters are your throughline, your safety net.
- Comedy is serious. Neither the characters nor the actors playing them should ever feel like they're in on the joke. Nothing backfires faster than actors or characters that know they're funny before an audience has a chance to make that determination for themselves. Characters can't be in on the joke; they have to be earnest and invested. Smugness kills the relationship with the audience.
- Take a step back. As Charlie Chaplin said, "Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot." A good comedy shows us a different perspective. It takes a step back from the emotional drama of daily life, and allows us to laugh at it from a distance. Some of the best comedy writers have mined the tragedy of their own lives for things to laugh at.
- Confidence. Embrace your specific comedy tone confidently. So much of comedy is in how it's delivered. Nothing kills creativity and comedy more than the fear of making a mistake or fear of looking bad. There are no wrong answers when you're in the open mode. Wait until later to be critical. Write first. Edit later.
- Focus on the mundane. There is much humour to be mined out of magnifying the mundane. As the great comedy screenwriter David Mandel points out, this was the operating principle behind both *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Richard Whitley remembers from his days as a staff writer on *Roseanne* that the mantra there was to "make the big out of the small."

And finally, have fun! Because if you're not laughing when you write it, your audience won't be laughing when they see it.