



"I just finished converting my son's bedroom into my office... that should get him to finally move out."

-- Brian Kiley

How to Write Comedy Like Brian Kiley



Who is Brian Kiley?

Brian Kiley is one of comedy's most respected joke craftsmen. Originally from Boston, Kiley spent over two decades as a writer for NBC's *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, earning multiple Emmy nominations and winning an Emmy Award for his work. He has also appeared numerous times as a stand-up comedian on shows such as *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, and *The Late Late Show*.



While many comedians build their acts around stories, characters, or personal revelations, Kiley is a pure joke writer. His material is built on precision, economy, and surprise. His jokes are clean, intelligent, and deceptively simple. In fact, that's one of the reasons he's so valuable to study.

At first glance, his jokes seem effortless:

"My daughter graduated from college during the pandemic and her graduation took place online. She was so disappointed. Here's the thing... she went to an online university."

But beneath that simplicity is a highly disciplined writing process. Kiley excels at leading the audience down one path and then revealing a completely different interpretation. Rather than writing punchlines, he writes assumptions—and then breaks them.

What makes Brian Kiley particularly valuable for aspiring comedians is that his approach is surprisingly teachable. His jokes are not dependent on outrageous characters, edgy topics, or elaborate storytelling. Instead, they rely on clear setups, everyday truths, careful misdirection, and strategic jumps between different branches of association.

If you can learn to think the way Brian Kiley thinks, you'll discover that strong jokes can come from almost any ordinary observation. That's why this may be one of the most linear and practical comedy writing courses we've ever taught.

📺 The Most One-Liners You'll Ever Hear In A Comedy Show. B...

Listen to the shape of the joke. There are some jokes that could be tightened.

Let's Write from Kiley's Set Ups

Here are **just the setups** from Brian Kiley's Dry Bar set, stripped of punchlines. This is a great exercise because you'll notice Kiley's setups are usually:

- Short
- Conversational



- Completely believable
- Often framed as an observation, personal experience, or question
- Designed to point your brain in one direction before he yanks it another way

What You'll Notice

Most of Kiley's setups fall into a handful of templates: In addition to **Nostalgia**. What else is going on?

1. **Personal Observation**

- "My wife..."
- "My son..."
- "My neighbor..."
- "My daughter..."

2. **Question Setup**

- "Do you have a friend..."
- "If you had a time machine..."

3. **News/Trend Setup**

- Pandemic
- Masks
- Meditation
- Impossible Burgers

4. **Story Setup**

- "One time..."
- "The other day..."
- "A couple weeks ago..."

5. **Authority Setup**

- Doctor said...
- Cop said...
- Attorney said...
- Marriage counselor said...

A big Brian Kiley lesson is that the setup rarely sounds like a joke. It sounds like the opening sentence of a normal conversation. Then he rewrites the expected ending.

"Tell the Truth → Rewrite the Truth"



Today I spent the day converting my son's bedroom into my office.
Since the Pandemic: We didn't see my wife's family for Easter. We didn't see them for Christmas.
So I'm from Boston originally, but I live in Los Angeles now, and things shut down there around March of 2020.

When the pandemic started, I drove by the park in my neighborhood and spotted a guy sunbathing naked.

I saw a doctor on TV one day saying we may have to wear masks for the rest of our lives.

I think people are sick of the masks.

**Dogs are better than men. A Dog will lie down.
10 Ways Dogs are Better than Men / Women.**

My daughter graduated from college during the pandemic and her graduation took place online.

I got into some bad habits during the pandemic. I'd stay up late at night and buy things on Amazon.

I had a weird thing happen a couple of weeks ago. I looked out on my front porch and spotted a coyote.

One Saturday during the pandemic it was the little girl next door's birthday and she couldn't have a birthday party.

I got my will taken care of during the pandemic.



I was doing some research on the internet the other night and discovered there had once been a murder in the house we're currently living in.

When I was a little kid, my grandfather died.

I was at a job interview last week. The guy asked me like a hundred questions.

Yesterday the guy who was supposed to fix our doorbell didn't show up.

My aunt retired this week. She worked at the DMV for 40 years.

My neighbor said to me, "You don't know this about me, but I've had a lot of Botox."

My wife did Ancestry.com and discovered one of her ancestors graduated in the first graduating class at Harvard.

I got stopped by the cops last week.

I saw someone hitchhiking the other day. That's so dangerous.

I tried one of those Impossible burgers. They're delicious

Do you have a friend you've known a long time who suddenly tells you something that blows your mind?

A friend asked me, "If you had a time machine, would you go back and kill baby Hitler?"

My teenage daughter thinks she knows everything.

My wife told me today that my daughter has been shoplifting.

Someone asked me where I was from.

I was back in Boston a couple years ago and visited my childhood home.



I went to one of those giant corn mazes.

I live in L.A. now. It's a strange place.

My neighbor told me that meditating for 40 minutes every morning changed his life.

My wife recently put together an earthquake plan. They stand under the doorway...

My wife and I recently celebrated our 29th wedding anniversary.

Fifty percent of married people say they're unhappily married.

Every time my wife and I watch a movie together, she falls asleep in the first five minutes.

My wife is an amazing woman. She knows a lot about wine.

My wife is about a foot shorter than I am.

My wife has a guy she works with that she refers to as her "work husband."

I met my wife on jury duty.

My wife is always shocked when I actually know something.

My wife was a psychology major, so she's constantly psychoanalyzing me.

We started seeing a marriage counselor.

My wife is the best thing that ever happened to me.

We've got two kids.

Years ago my wife and I were told we were unable to have children.



One time my son was four years old. We came back from the drugstore and he pulled a candy bar out of his pocket.

Years ago our local Y had Mommy and Me exercise classes.

It's so different being a parent these days.

My wife was the one who talked me into shaving my head.

My kids are getting older. I've got two teenagers.

My son always calls me when he's drunk.

This year my daughter is taking philosophy classes.

My son graduates next year.

Now that I'm a dad, I'll call my dad and ask for advice.

My siblings and I call our dad G.I. Joe.

My father is allergic to cotton.

I made the mistake a few months ago of calling in sick from the airport.

Sometimes in the middle of the night I'll stop breathing.

I got something in the mail today that said, "This is not a bill."

I bought a box of animal crackers.

I don't get these people who buy individual rolls of toilet paper.

My grandfather came to this country from Ireland in search of a better life.

We always called my grandfather Poppy.



I've done some research and it turns out I'm super Irish.

It's amazing what our ancestors went through to come to this country.

My wife tells me she has an uncle who can tell you exactly when and how you're going to die.

When I was growing up, the guy across the street from us was actually in the Mafia.

I grew up in a very religious family, but my best friend now is an atheist.

When I was growing up we had a little yellow cat called Butter.

Kiley's Technique: Assumption-Based Misdirection

He starts with a statement that sounds completely truthful and ordinary:

"My daughter graduated from college during the pandemic and her graduation took place online."

The audience instantly builds a story:

- Traditional university
- Pandemic restrictions
- Missed graduation ceremony

Then:

"She went to an online university."

The audience realizes their assumption was wrong.

The sentence itself wasn't grammatically misleading.

The **audience's interpretation** was.



Another Example

"My attorney said to me, when you die, do you want to be buried or cremated?"

Your brain creates a serious discussion about end-of-life planning.

Then:

"I said, surprise me."

The premise remains intact.

The response destroys the expected emotional frame.

He's Using

- Misdirection
- Assumption reversal
- Expectation violation
- Reframing
- Paraprosdokian (when the surprise comes at the end)

With most of them he helps the listener see certain images, then he shatters those images.

But Kiley's particular style is often:

Truth → Assumption → Reversal

1. Tell the truth.
2. Let the audience make a reasonable assumption.
3. Reveal a different interpretation.

For teaching purposes, I might actually call it:

The Kiley Assumption Trap

Because that's what's happening psychologically.



He doesn't trick the audience with lies.

He lets them trick themselves.

Look at these:

Setup	Audience Assumption	Reveal
"My daughter graduated online."	Traditional college during COVID	Online university
"There was a murder in our house."	Years ago	Two years after we moved in
"My best friend revealed something shocking."	Secret life	He's imaginary
"We were told we couldn't have children."	Doctor	Landlord
"I met my wife on jury duty."	Romantic story	She was acquitted

Notice how all of these begin with something that is literally true.

That's why Kiley gets such huge laughs without sounding like he's "setting up a joke."

He's really setting up an **assumption**.

That may be the most important lesson in his entire act:

-Don't write a joke.

-Write a sentence that causes the audience to make a prediction.

-Then make a different prediction come true.

The Kiley Association Drill



Take any topic.

Example: Mask

List 20 associations.

- Doctor
- Surgeon
- Nurse
- Hospital
- Halloween
- Batman
- Zorro
- Bandit
- Bank Robber
- Ski Mask
- Welder
- Gas Mask
- Covid
- Liberal
- Conservative
- Criminal
- Disguise
- Costume
- Protection
- Identity

Now ask:

Which two associations are furthest apart?

- Doctor ↔ Bank Robber
- Public Health ↔ Criminal
- Liberal ↔ Bandit

Those contrasts often contain jokes.



What's interesting is that Kiley does this so smoothly it doesn't feel like word association.

It feels like he simply thought of a funny ending.

But underneath, I suspect he's doing exactly what you've taught for years with your Listing Technique.

He's collecting:

- Associated people
- Associated places
- Associated professions
- Associated situations

Then choosing the association that creates the strongest surprise.

You could even argue that many of Kiley's reverses are:

Truth + Association Jump + Reverse

The audience thinks along one branch of the association tree.

Kiley suddenly jumps to another branch.

Mask → Doctor

becomes

Mask → Bank Robber

and the joke is born.

That's one reason his jokes feel so effortless. The setup is grounded in reality, but the punchline comes from an entirely different association network than the one the audience was following.

Final takeaway:



Most comedians spend their time searching for punchlines.

Brian Kiley spends his time controlling assumptions.

The audience hears:

"My daughter graduated online."

And they build their own story.

Kiley simply waits for them to finish writing it...

...and then hands them a different ending.

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