



"When I started to do act-outs, that's when I felt my comedy went to the next level..."

-- Bill Burr

Write Better Dialogue for Your Act-Outs



What Is an Act-Out?

An act-out is when you stop telling the story...

...and you step into it.



The Key Components of an Act-Out

Every effective act-out has three parts:

1. The Narrator (YOU)

You guide the audience:

- Where are we?
- What's happening?
- Who's speaking?

2. The Characters

You shift into:

- Yourself in the moment
- The other person (or people)

This is where dialogue happens.

3. The Return

You come back to the narrator to:

- Clarify
- Tag the joke
- Move the bit forward

Why Act-Outs Work

Act-outs:



- Turn jokes into **experiences**
 - `Take the audience **inside the joke**
- Add **dimension and perspective**
- Build **tension in real time**
- Create opportunities for **multiple laughs**

Instead of describing what happened, you show it happening by becoming the people in the scene.

I think the biggest mistake new comedians make is they think the act-out is something BIG. They get loud, they flop on the floor, hump a stool, jump up and down.

In fact, to stay consistent with the idea of what comedy is, when you do an act-out because it's an act-out, you play it **under the comedy** rather than over the story.

The act-out shouldn't overshadow the story. The act-out should be an authentic and organic extension of the story.

An act-out is not about being "more performative."

It's about being **more specific**.

I think this is where comedians get tongue-tied and can't figure out what to say in an act-out.

Keep it Real

Just think of an act-out as the conversation taking place and we're over-hearing it.



Core Concepts

1. The Narrator is Your Anchor

No matter how big or subtle the act-out is...

The audience must always know:

- Who you are (the narrator)
- Where they are (the scene)
- Who is speaking (you vs. the other character)

Act-outs don't come out of nowhere.

They are:

Introduced clearly

Guided intentionally

Exited cleanly

2. First-Person Act-Outs (Conversational Power)

Any time you're telling a story and someone else speaks...

Don't paraphrase it.

Act it out in first person.

Structure:

- Narrator: sets the scene
- You: your response



- Other person: their dialogue

This creates:

- Clarity
- Perspective
- Immediate immersion

Talk like it's a conversation, not prose. You're not writing. You're talking.

3. Diegetic Interruption (Sound as Punchline)

Sometimes the punchline isn't words.

It's a sound.

It's a sudden, unexpected shift:

- Breaks rhythm
- Releases tension
- Creates surprise
- Running gag - means it repeats as a callback and sometimes escalates.

This is called **diegetic interruption**.

The set up to the act-out is sometimes a crystal clear conversion of two dissimilar ideas.

Let's take a look at Chris Rock and how this act-out **escalates the piece**



▶ **Chris Rock - "The Stripper Myth"**

[Let's look at Maria Bamford.](#)

4. Immersion with Clear Setup

You can fully “live” inside characters...

But ONLY if:

The setup is crystal clear.

Otherwise, the audience gets lost.

[\(Think: Brian Regan\)](#)

5. Subtle vs. Broad Act-Outs

Act-outs exist on a spectrum:

- Subtle (small shifts, minimal movement)
(Rita Rudner)
- Broad (voices, accents, full embodiment)
(Robin Williams)
- Impression-Based
(Shane Gillis)

The key is not size.

The key is **relevance to the bit, the way you explain it, and the way you contain it.**



The Comedian Plays:

- The Narrator
- The Characters

Here's a simple 3-person act-out. (Narrator & Characters):

Example:

Narrator: My Ex, who cheated on me called me on Halloween. She was like...

EX's Voice: Jerry, I don't know what to pretend to be for Halloween.

Narrator: I just said...

ME (IN THE SCENE): Why don't you just dress normally and pretend to be in a committed relationship.

Notice how the Narrator keeps it all on track. The act-outs are usually short lines and the act-out is broken up and the audience is guided through the story by the comedian (Narrator).

When you start, try to avoid doing long, drawn out act-outs.

Keeping an act-out as a **Natural Extension of the Story:**

It's very organic. Not wild. But it still adds a dimension and dynamic shift to the story.

[Let's Watch Joe List and his Conversational Act-outs.](#)



Based on this simple 3-character act-out. (He said / She said or He said / He said or She said / She said)

Exercise - Write a Simple 3 Character Act-out.

- You at the store
- You on the phone with the doctor
- You leaving a voice message
- You in bed with your significant other
- You at the Dentist/Doctor
- You at a restaurant.

Any other scenario you want.

3 Parts.

The Set-Up: Usually you (the narrator establishing the scene)

Character 1: You in the scene.

Character 2: The other person in the scene

Note:

When you're doing characters in an act-out, one way to think about the dialogue in the act out if you consider:

- What is each character doing?



- What's their POV
- How to they feel about the situation?
- What's their state of mind?

Like what how would a character talk if

- He/she was tired?
- Sick
- In love?
- Out of breath?
- Jonesing for a fix?

Using emotional point of view. (Which kinda happens naturally when you're just telling a story). The emotions can inspire you to start with a sigh, or an Ugh! A whisper, etc.

Add more dynamic using music

Now let's watch Joe List as he amps it up a little with a [pseudo musical act-out \(Still Conversational\)](#)

Notice the narrator still guides the audience through the scene with a clear set-up. There's no extra words.



Exercise 2: Diegetic Interruption

Objective: Use sound as a punchline

Instructions:

1. Set up a situation with tension



2. Instead of a verbal punchline...
3. End with a **sound-based interruption**

Examples:

- A crash
- A squeak
- A phone noise
- A weird vocalization

The sound should:

- Break expectation
- Release tension
- Be surprising but logical

EXERCISE 3: Act-Out for Misdirection

Objective: Use an act-out to set up a reverse

Instructions:

1. Write a premise
2. Create an act-out that builds a **clear expectation**
3. Deliver a **reverse** that breaks that expectation

Make sure:

- The act-out feels believable
- The audience commits to it
- The reversal hits clean and fast



I was in Texas. Everyone says ‘Y’all’ in Texas. Everyone. I was at an expensive French restaurant in Dallas. And the waiter was like, totally French. He come to the table and is like, “Good evening Mademoiselle, Monsieur. Welcome to Cafe Le Bonne... What can I get for Y’all.”

Write your own below using the act-out to misdirect:

Exercise - Big Challenge.

Write a piece or a bit, that uses some music. Bonus if it’s recognizable (Like Joe List’s Welcome to the Jungle).

The Trick is to have the music or lyric, solve the problem or resolve the story and provide an answer or a punchline. The coincidence being that the words in the song are actually the punchline.

Final Takeaway

Act-outs are not about “acting.”

They are about:

- **Clarity**
- **Tension**
- **Efficiency**
- **Impact**



When done right...

They don't distract from the joke.

They **ARE** the joke.

Get personal 1 on 1 Coaching with Jerry just follow [this link](#) to learn more!

