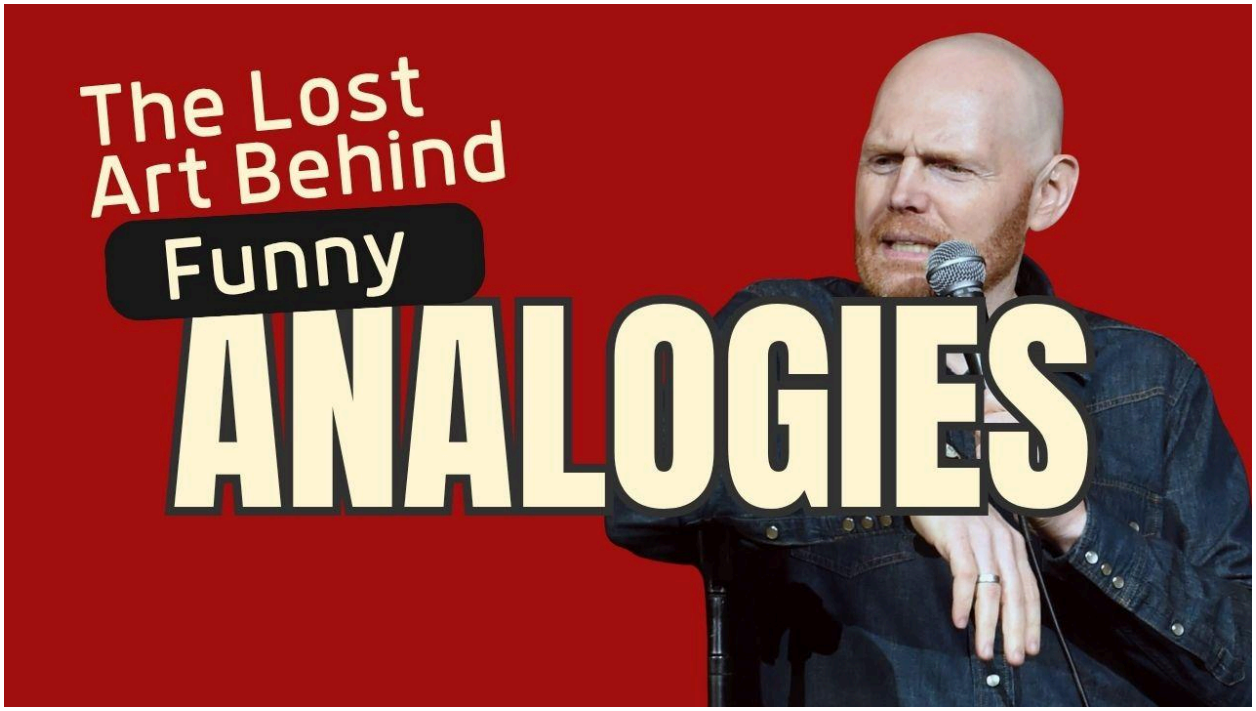
“Whoever said money can’t buy happiness simply didn’t know where to go shopping”
-- Bo Derek

The Lost Art of Writing Funny Analogies



What is an Analogy?

An analogy is a comparison between two different things that reveals a shared characteristic, behavior, or relationship.

We use analogies to explain unfamiliar ideas through familiar ones. In comedy, we use them to expose something surprising, ridiculous, revealing, or unexpectedly true.

One useful definition of a joke is **the convergence of two dissimilar ideas.** Analogy gives us one of the most efficient ways to create that convergence.

We already have one idea: our premise. The analogy introduces a second idea that helps the audience see that premise differently.

1. What Makes an Analogy Funny?

An ordinary analogy helps us understand something.

A funny analogy helps us understand something **and reveals an unexpected connection.**

Consider this original classroom example:

“My phone battery is like my social energy. It starts the day at 100 percent, and one conversation with my ex there’s a pop-up that says “Low Battery”

The two ideas are:

- A phone’s battery.
- A person’s social energy.

The connection is a limited supply that gets drained through use.

But the connection alone isn’t the entire joke. The Ex gives us a specific source of irritation and an emotional point of view.

The writing question is more useful than simply asking, “What is this like?”

Ask:

> “What is this doing—and where else does that happen?”

A customer-service department and a maze don’t look alike. But both can keep you moving without getting you anywhere.

A family group chat and a courtroom don’t look alike. But both can involve accusations, competing testimony, and evidence nobody will let go of.

We are looking for a shared pattern underneath two different subjects.

Quick discussion

Complete this sentence:

“Waiting for customer service feels like _____.”

Then identify the connection:

“They both _____.”

If we can’t explain the connection clearly, we may have chosen a random comparison rather than a useful analogy.

2. Four Comedians Who Use Analogy Effectively

As we watch each clip, identify:

Element	Question
Premise	What situation, observation, or argument starts the joke?
Point of view	How does the comedian feel about it?
Second idea	What different idea enters the joke?
Connection	What behavior or relationship joins the two ideas?
Punchline	Where does the comparison first produce a laugh?
Tag or topper	What additional detail develops or escalates it?

An analogy can supply the first punchline. It can also enter after a laugh and function as a tag or topper. We want to distinguish those uses.

Jim Gaffigan — Parenting Becomes a Drowning Situation

"4 Kids/ Home Birth" - Jim Gaffigan (Mr. Universe)

The analogy intensifies the premise because the added baby represents both another person to protect and another responsibility.

What was the context that led to the analogy?

When you have 4 kids bedtime is like _____ .

Give me 3 other ideas we could compare this to.

Mark Normand — Planes Become School for Adults

Watch: Planes Are Like School for Adults — Comedy Central

What was the context that leads to the analogy?

Taylor Tomlinson — Arm Floaties

Watch: Taylor Tomlinson's PSA on Arm Floaties — Netflix Is A Joke

Premise: Her experience managing mental health and accepting needed support.

Comparison idea: Swimming.

Original situation	Swimming idea
Difficulty managing her condition	Not knowing how to swim
Medication in her account	Arm floaties
Entering situations without needed support	Jumping into the deep end

Making a partner carry everything	Using another swimmer as flotation

The analogy establishes a idea with physical rules. Those rules let her explore embarrassment, responsibility, judgment, and relationships.

Ask the class:

> "At what point does the analogy become a scene?"

Writing takeaway:

> Once you establish the second idea, follow its rules to discover consequences.

This is how an analogy grows beyond a single punchline.

Bill Burr — Analogy Becomes a Topper

15 Minutes of Bill Burr Stand-Up Comedy | Netflix Is A Joke

Premise: Burr imagines the president's male spouse being told to stay out of her political role.

He acts out the rejection, then compares the spouse's position to Tom Arnold's position when he was married to Roseanne. He follows that status comparison with invented Secret Service code names that exaggerate the spouse's irrelevance.

Bill Burr on Actors Portraying Disabled People in Movies

The relationship:

> Central public figure versus peripheral spouse.

Ask the class:

> “Which beat is the analogy, and which beat is the topper?”

The celebrity-spouse relationship supplies the analogy. The code-name sequence escalates it.

Writing takeaway:

> An analogy can establish a status relationship that generates dialogue, labels, and act-outs.

This provides an edgy example. Preview the selected passage for language and context.

3. John Oliver — Making Abstract Absurdity Visible

John Oliver often discusses complicated issues. The analogy is a great way for him to attach a second idea that’s very recognizable but completely unrelated to the main idea.

When the analogy connects the two ideas we now understand it way more, and we laugh that the two unrelated ideas are actually similar.

This one is actually introduced by a nurse in a hospital. And it’s not only an analogy, it’s a parallel analogy. (A to B is like C to D)

Generic Drugs: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)

Transcript

But unfortunately, in recent years, there have been eye-catching stories about sudden drug shortages, often involving some exceptionally common generics.

CUT AWAY TO REPORTER

“Mass General has a tough enough job without having to deal with a drug shortage.”

“I never thought we would get to a point in the U.S. healthcare system where we wouldn’t have essential medicines to be able to treat patients.”

The hospital can’t get enough of the blood thinner heparin, crucial for cardiac surgery.

“How surprising was it for you to hear that there was a heparin shortage?”

“Oh, it was completely surprising. It’s extremely frustrating. I mean, it’s like McDonald’s running out of ketchup.”

BACK TO OLIVER

Yeah, that’s a pretty apt comparison. A hospital without heparin is indeed like a McDonald’s without ketchup, or a Subway without bread, or a Chick-fil-A without the pervading undercurrent of homophobia.

NOTE: Notice how when John Oliver took the repeated the line and then stacked it, he built it to a 3-descriptor line, which is a nice escalation.

4. Analogy as a Drop-In Punchline Device

When you have a premise but can’t find a punchline, ask:

> **“Where are the two dissimilar ideas that can converge?”**

For this exercise, we already have one idea. Our job is to find the second.

I was on the phone with my ex-wife. I have a good relationship with that particular ex. But she is a very type A+ personality. One time I got off the phone with her I felt a little stress, so I do what I do, I make jokes.

So I got off the phone with her and thought My ex is like.

Then I made a quick list about my ex.

Alcoholic
Talks fast
Often stammers

So the joke was like:
“My ex is very type A. It’s like her thoughts are going too fast for her mouth to keep up so she’s always like, (ACT-OUT). It’s bad. I’m not exaggerating. Like if she got on the call right now, you’d be like, “Wow, he wasn’t lying!” Like one time I had sex with her… I stuttered for 3 days. She’s also an alcoholic. She’s a lot like a (Then I looked for anything that was in my vicinity and I found my iPhone.) So this was the resulting joke: My ex who’s an alcoholic is a lot like an iPhone. I can usually find her at at least one bar. And if I don’t see her right away, I look closer because she probably fell on the floor.” (And you want to be careful with that because the face could get cracked…”)

The process

1. State the premise.
2. Identify your emotional point of view.
3. Describe the underlying behavior or relationship.
4. Find five different ideas where that relationship occurs.
5. Choose one and explore its details.

Live demonstration

Premise:

“Joining my gym took one click. Canceling took eight phone calls and a threat to sue.”

Underlying relationship:

Easy entry. Obstructed exit.

Possible comparison ideas:

- An escape room.

- A maze.
- A cult.
- A controlling relationship.
- A casino.

Punchline draft:

“I didn’t join a gym. I joined an IKEA nautilus machines and sweat covered dumbbells… and it all comes with monthly payments… I’m walking around looking for an exit, like ‘I just want to get out of here.”

Tag:

Next time I join a gym, I’m gonna save a step and have my lawyer cancel.

Topper:

> “The emergency exit just takes you to the registration desk.”

Once we find the second idea, we gain choices.

Exercise — Find Five ideas

Choose a subject:

- Customer service.
- Dating apps.
- A family group chat.
- Being told to relax.
- Job interviews.
- Getting older.

Complete:

> My premise is _____.
>
> What bothers, surprises, or fascinates me is _____.
>
> The underlying relationship is _____.

Five other places this happens are _____.

Write one analogy punchline and two possible tags.

Readback questions

- Does the comparison fit?
- Is it surprising?
- Can we picture it?
- Does the tag reveal something new?

5. Remove the “Is Like” Formula (You don’t have to.)

“Is like” is useful for discovering the connection and building the tension with the illogical verbal ‘equation.’

But we don’t always need it in the performed joke.

We can deliver the comparison through a metaphor, an imagined consequence, dialogue, or an act-out.

Chris Rock — The Stripper Myth

Watch: Chris Rock — The Stripper Myth

Clip cue: Begin with the tuition claim and continue through the smart-lap-dance act-out.

Premise: Rock challenges the claim that stripping is being done to pay college tuition.

He brings academic knowledge into the lap-dance setting and acts out the resulting encounter.

The two ideas converge:

- Lap Dance.
- Intellectual conversation.

He lets the audience experience the friction by the scene he creates.

Patrice O'Neal was great at sneaking in the is-like:

Patrice O'Neal - Elephant in the Room (2011) 1080p Full Comedy Stand Up Show

6. The Three-Descriptor Ending

Now we move toward the top of the analogy food chain:

> **Find a comparison that supports three telling descriptors, with the strongest reveal last.**

Each descriptor should fit both the premise and its comparison idea.

Original example

Premise:

> "My family group chat never resolves anything."

Descriptor	Function
Everybody's arguing	Establishes the connection
Nobody's listening	Develops the dysfunction
Grandma introduces evidence from 1987	Adds specificity and a sharper comic picture

A more compressed version:

"My family group chat is like a courtroom: argumentative, judgmental, and still obsessed with what I did wrong in 1987."

Three descriptors don't have to be three single adjectives. They can be three descriptive phrases.

Additional original drafts

Clean:

“My inbox is like a baby’s diaper: if I don’t check it regularly, it gets filled with crap.”

Edgy:

“Dating apps are like a strip club: flattering, expensive, and everybody’s hoping that money is not the only thing getting blown.”

✍️Exercise — Build the Three Descriptors

1. List six details that fit both ideas.
2. Select the strongest three.
3. Put the most surprising detail last.
4. Read the line aloud.
5. Compare it with a shorter version.

A third descriptor earns its place by changing the picture.

If it weakens the laugh, replace it or cut it.

7. Parallel Analogies — The School Exercise

We learned relationship analogies in school:

> **A is to B as C is to D.**

They also appeared on the older SAT, before analogy questions were removed in the 2005 redesign. muse.union.edu

Analogy	Relationship
Finger is to hand as toe is to foot	Part to whole
In is to out as up is to down	Opposites

Green is to go as red is to stop	Signal to action
Chef is to kitchen as pilot is to cockpit	Worker to workplace
Key is to lock as password is to account	Means of access to protected target

The order matters

Finger → Hand
Toe → Foot

Both relationships move from part to whole.

Now reverse the second pair:

Finger → Hand
Foot → Toe

The audience has to repair the relationship.

We are comparing how things relate to each other.

That is the skill we bring into comedy writing.

Warm-Up

Complete five:

1. Librarian is to library as _____ is to _____.
2. Leaf is to tree as _____ is to _____.
3. Brake is to stop as _____ is to _____.
4. Rehearsal is to performance as _____ is to _____.
5. Beginner is to expert as _____ is to _____.

Say the relationship aloud before completing the pair.

8. Parallel and Contrasting Analogies

For this workshop:

- **Parallel analogies** connect corresponding relationships.
- **Contrasting analogies** use that connection to expose an exaggerated claim, false equivalence, or absurd mismatch.

The labels can overlap. A contrasting joke can still have a parallel structure.

Three useful writing forms

Form	Original example
X is to Y what A is to B	"My treadmill is to fitness what a bookmark is to literature. It shows where I stopped."
Doing X makes you Y like doing A makes you B	"Watching cooking videos makes me a chef like watching courtroom dramas makes me a lawyer."
This process is like that process	"My smart fridge recommends food the way a casino recommends gambling. It knows what I like, and it never recommends leaving."

Using the Attached Handout

The Food Network contestant example asks:

> Does participating in something briefly make you an expert?

The comparison works by finding another situation where a small encounter is being treated as professional mastery.

The relationship is:

Limited participation → inflated credential.

Once we identify that relationship, we can search across:

- Medicine
- Education
- Sports
- Technology
- Entertainment
- Personal Relationships.

NOTE: The surprising half still has to fit.

We want the audience to recognize the connection at the reveal.

9. Bill Maher — Parallel Relationships in Monologue Jokes

Example One — The Repairman and the Plumber

Monologue: Dueling Grandpas | Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO)

Clip cue: Locate the laptop-repair passage and continue through the plumber/underwear-drawer comparison.

Premise: Maher questions why repairing a computer would involve inspecting private emails.

Comparison: A plumber discovers drugs unrelated in a private drawer.

Original idea	Comparison idea
Computer repair professional	Plumber
Fixing a laptop	Fixing pipes
Inspecting unrelated private messages	Searching an unrelated private drawer

Writing question:



“Where else would this behavior seem wildly inappropriate?”

The familiar service encounter makes the objection concrete.

Write this as a parallel analogy.

Example Two: A Temporary Fix and Duct Tape

Watch: Monologue — Til Debt Do Us Part

Clip cue: Locate the temporary government-funding discussion and the shower-nozzle comparison.

Premise: Maher mocks celebrating a temporary funding solution.

Comparison idea: A household patch postpones a proper plumbing repair.

So, for a parallel analogy you might reconstruct the joke like this:

> *Temporary government fix is to lasting resolution as duct-tape on a shower pipe is to proper plumbing repair*.

Does this parallel analogy help to make the point more clear? Give it emphasis?

The difference between postponing a problem and solving it.

These are spoken situational analogies. We are translating their relationships into the school formula to see the structure underneath.

Identify 3 problems you’ve encountered in your life and how you fixed them.
Then look at wildly inappropriate ways to address the problem.
Then shape it in a parallel analogy.

Fixing _____ with _____ is like Fixing/Solving _____ with _____.

10. Final Writing and Performance Exercise

Choose one premise and develop:

1. A clear statement with an emotional point of view.
2. Five possible comparison ideas.
3. One analogy punchline.
4. Two tags.
5. One version without “is like.”
6. One three-descriptor ending.
7. One parallel or contrasting analogy.

Performance review

Question	Revision to try
Is the premise clear?	State the situation and attitude sooner
Can we identify the connection?	The key is to find a wildly unrelated idea and show how they connect.
Is the comparison predictable?	Search a more distant but recognizable idea
Does it require explanation?	Make the image or relationship clearer
Does the tag repeat the punchline?	Follow another consequence of the second idea
Is the third descriptor weaker?	Replace it or cut it

Closing Thought

We don’t have to wait for a punchline to appear.

We can identify the relationship in our premise, find another idea where that relationship exists, and explore the choices that idea gives us.

We can state the analogy, put it inside a scene, extend it with tags, or sharpen it into a parallel comparison.

Homework

Write 25 simple parallel analogies.

Then choose three premises and find five comparison ideas for each. Develop your strongest idea into a 30–60 second bit. Record it and identify where the first laugh—and each additional laugh—actually occurs.

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