“National Comedy Center, described Joan Rivers joke catalog as one of “the crown jewels of comedy that exist on planet Earth.””

How to Write Comedy Like Joan Rivers



Background

“When you’re hot you’re hot. When you’re not, you work your ass off until you're hot again…”

watch Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work (Clip of Joan’s set in Queens)

Joan Rivers was an icon like no other woman in the history of comedy. She did jokes that were not being done at the time. Even when her manager said she's saying things that really shouldn't be said, Joan's response was, "Those are the things that should be said." She spoke about abortion on TV when they weren't allowed to say the word abortion.

watch Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work - "Abortion" joke on Merv Griffin

Joan was not afraid to take on challenging material. She did a joke that went: 'This business is all about casting couches so I want you to know that my name is Joan Rivers and I put out.'
I was twenty-eight years old. Part of the audience laughed. Jack Lemmon walked out. He said, "'That's disgusting' and left."

Lesson: Don't let them shut you up, don't let them dumb you down. Don't let them tell you that you're a lady and you should behave a certain way. Be YOU! Realize that there are going to be some people that like you and some people that hate you. Just be bold and be you.

But check your material sometimes with your friends. Be sure it's not racist. Daring, maybe, but don't be racist because that's not funny. It's hateful. But then again, you can be like Nick Dipaolo and be racist and there will be an audience out there for you too. But remember, Traditionally comedy relates to the underdog and doesn't usually punch down.

Joan has also written some jokes that she was told by her closest colleagues not to say.

If watching a few clips of Joan Rivers reminds you of The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel Then you would be right in assuming that Mrs. Maisel was inspired by Joan Rivers' career.

I think one of the things that held Joan Rivers back was that she had to be in everything. She was a great writer and had the potential to write funny stories,

plays and shows. The problem is she couldn't perceive a show like Mrs. Maisel because she was a bit limited in her view outside of herself.

She didn't want to be an Executive Producer, she wanted the show to be her.

Speed, wit, timing

Joan Rivers demonstrates that when you have an abundance of jokes you can finesse them into stories, routines, ad-libs, crowd work, interviews and audience Q&As.

Joan Rivers started as an actress, then would crack jokes with the secretaries at Auditions. They would say, "You should tell them that you're a stand-up comedian."

Joan studied improv at Second City, but then heard that you could get paid 6 bucks a night if you could do stand-up comedy. So she transcribed Johnny Carson's jokes and started that way.

Drive, Commitment & Passion

"People ask me why I am in the business? Ask a nun why she's a nun. I have no choice… that's my drive at 4 in the morning at the airport. And that's where I was by the time I could figure it out. There was no question where I was going. There was no drugs, there was no sex, there was no anything. No nothing until I got my job… that's where I was going… and just go away."

Yeah, there's nobody like Joan Rivers. No single person I've ever met in comedy has the drive of this lady.

watch Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work - (49:03) To truly understand Joan Rivers, I think you have to watch multiple sets. And maybe watch her documentary "Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work"

In the documentary you'll learn how obsessive, compulsive she was with her material. She was also a bit of a narcissist. I think you have to be at some level to have that kind of drive. I think she was also (like most of us) deeply insecure at some level.

In 1968, *The New York Times* television critic Jack Gould called Rivers "quite possibly the most intuitively funny woman alive"

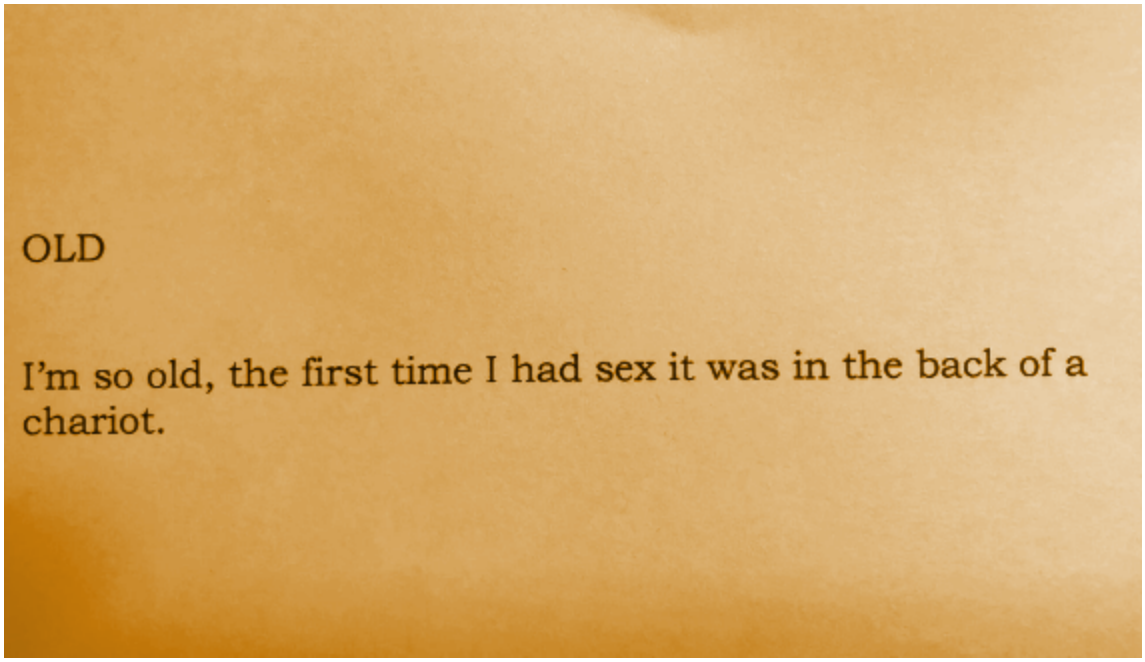
Content & Material, Structures

Act-Out ---> Reverse
watch Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work (Every Woman Should Yell - Birth Joke)

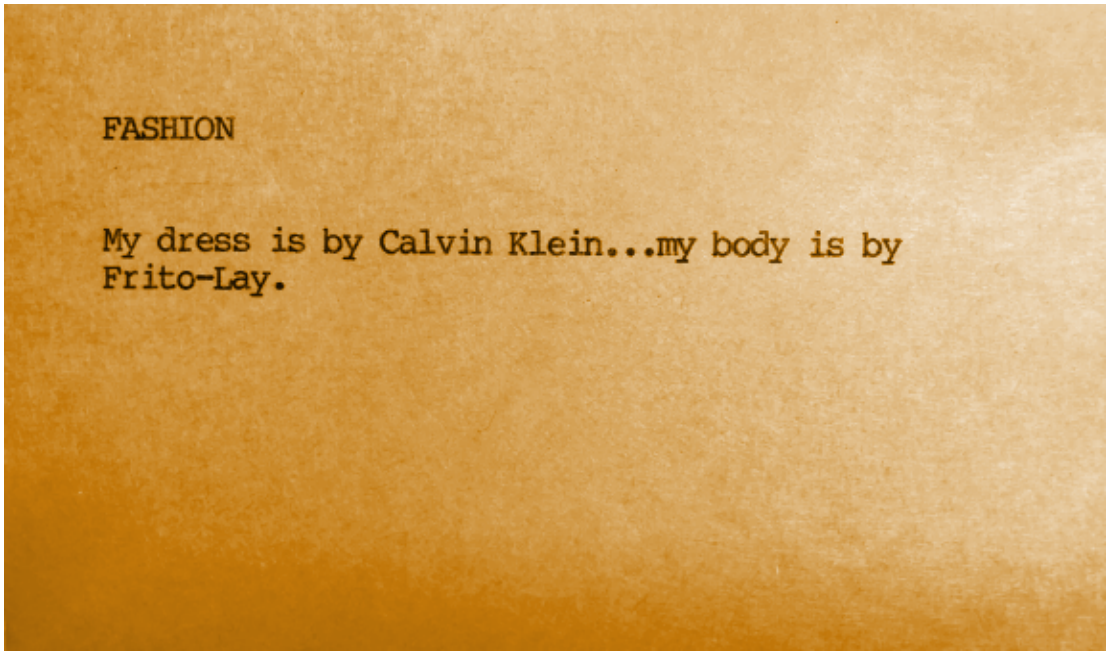
Joke Catalog

Joan Rivers had the largest catalog of jokes in the world. All written by her. The National Comedy Center, described the catalog as one of "the crown jewels of comedy that exist on planet Earth." This included a meticulously organized collection of 65,000 typewritten jokes on 3x5 cards.

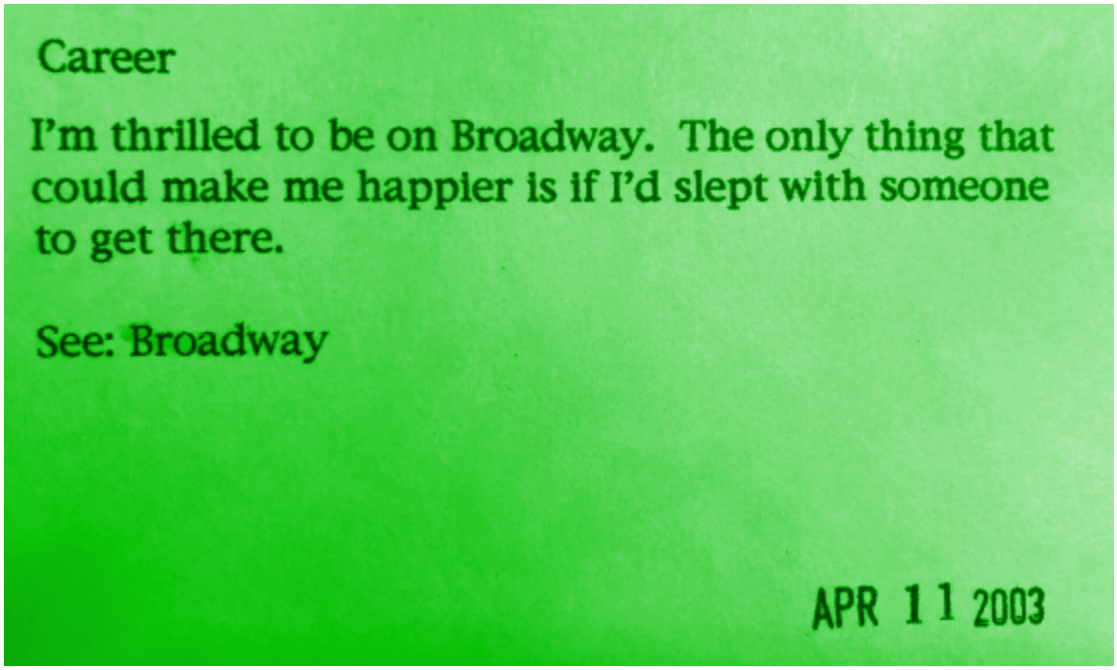

BEVERLY HILLS
BEVERLY HILLS BANK
BOY SCOUTS
BRA
CELEBRITY CARD
CHRISTMAS
NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS
NO TED APPEAL



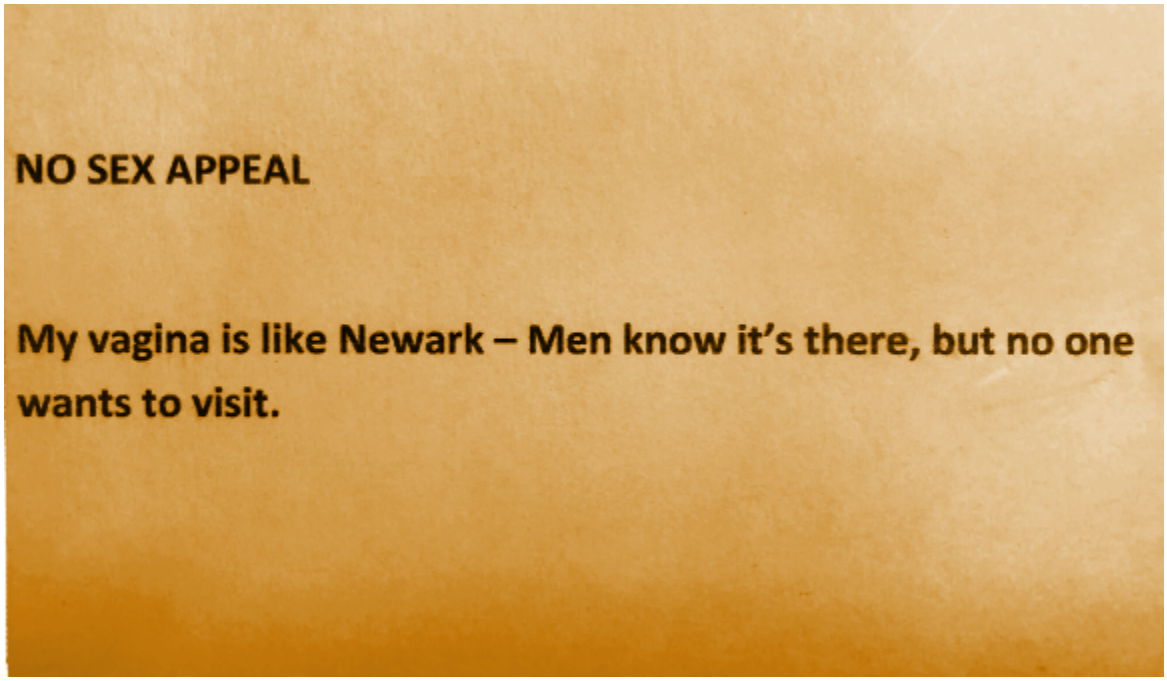
Incongruity, Analogy (in the shape of a “so” joke) (listing technique) (Vivid Imagery)



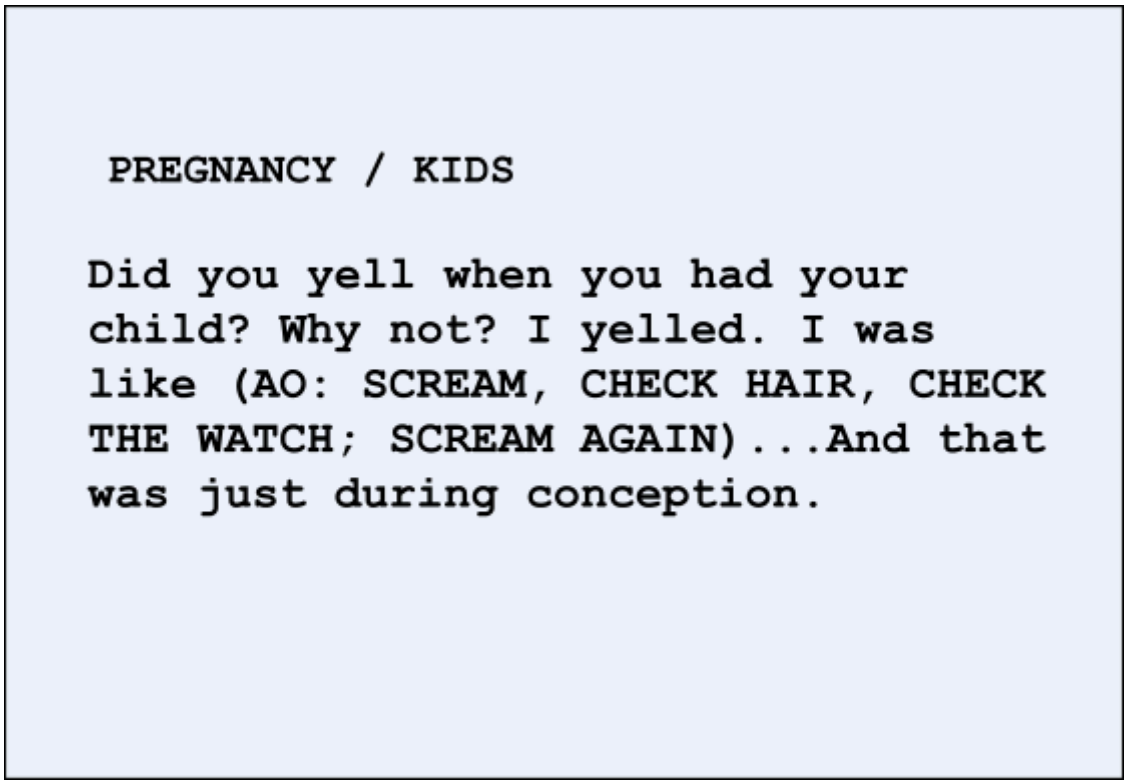
Compare & Contrast (Mirrored phrase)



Incongruity & Recognition, Cliche reformation. (Listing technique, you would find "casting couch" or "Sleep your way to the top")



Incongruity using Analogy (listing technique) Vivid Imagery 3-descriptors



ACT-OUT + REVERSE

BABY DELIVERY

I HAD A JEWISH DELIVERY, THAT'S WHERE THEY KNOCK YOU OUT WITH THE FIRST PAIN AND THEY WAKE YOU WHEN THE HAIRDRESSER SHOWS UP.

Incongruity - Baby Delivery + Jewish +

Delivery

Heightened Emotion

But it's not just the joke that matters. It's also the delivery.
It's like Joan was always annoyed or exasperated. That throughline drove through her act right to the end.
Joan was so fast. Her delivery was like a machine gun, but you'll notice one important thing. That her material was all driven by emotion. Heightened emotion.

When we talk about jokes, we talk about the two main elements of a joke: Target + Angle



Joan's exasperation both inspired her jokes and drove the performance of her jokes.

She would look for associations and connections between words and ideas and would treat the premise like a wet towel and wring it out until there was nothing left.

Joan didn't play the joke! She played the intent. She played the emotion. It was always like, "How can you not see..,

- how complicated this is?
- How painful this is?
- How much I hate that?
- How ridiculous this is?
- This is serious. Listen to me!

It was never like… here's the punchline. Please laugh.

Don't Play the Joke!

This is one of the singular mistakes new comedians make. They play for the laugh. They don't play for the understanding of what they are trying to communicate the dilemma they are experiencing in life.

Play the emotion through the joke. Don't play the joke.

Preparation

Few comedians today prepare as much as Joan Rivers prepared. She repeated the set over and over, retooled it and repeated it.

I mean, listen to her sets. She doesn't miss a beat.

I think this is something that new comedians can learn from Rivers. She worked her ass off. EVERY DAY.

Self Deprecation

Joan Rivers Live At The Apollo Part 2

How Joan Rivers Writes.

Joan just doesn't stop at one joke. Joan writes as many jokes on the topic as she can by fleshing out as many angles as possible. The listing technique helps in a simple brainstorming activity.

Pick a Subject, Any Subject

Subject: Aging

Subcategories: PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS, WORDS, PHRASES, CLICHES, EVENTS, OPPOSITES

Discover Premises while you're listing.

Premise = Two dissimilar ideas converging.
Flaws to Apply a top 10 list or "So Joke" device
Analogies: Sex at my age is like…
Cliche Reformations
Relatable Ideas (Brands, Common names, celebrities, etc.)

Who? What? Where? Why? When? How?

Here's an interesting fact about….

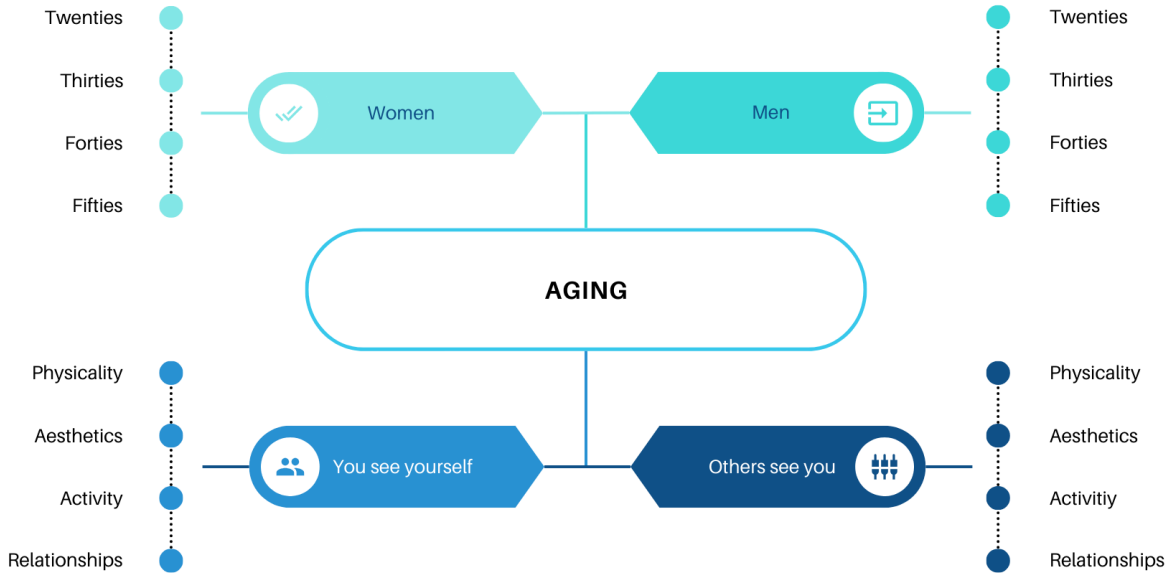
Aging

Men	**Women**
Physical Activity	Looks
Joints	Saggy Boobs
Back	Sex at my age
Fatigue	Wake up in the night to pee
Naps	Voice
Sex at my age. Sex at each stage.	Saggy Skin
Decades: 20's, 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's	Decades: 20's, 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's
You're only as old as you feel	Tampons
Age is just a number	At my age! (Filter, Angle)
40 is the new 20	Dry skin
Gray Hair	Dry Vagina
Balls start sagging	Everything Drops
Wake up in the middle of the night to pee	Your Vagina drops
Wrinkles	Stay active
Saggy neck	Watch what you eat
Balding	Overeaters anonymous
Stop caring so much about looks	Sleep on the plane
You need kleenex	Never stop working



E.D.?	Hair
Thinking about diet and exercise	Plastic surgery
Going to the gym when you're older	Tuck
Food you eat	Eyelift
Dating	Face lift
Dating Apps Plenty of Fish, Match.com, Hinge, Tinder, Bumble,	Nose job
Listen to AM Radio	Makeup (Brands)
More interested in the news	Fashion Changes when you're older
Watch more TV	You fart more
I don't want to get old	Friends with benefits
Ageism	Retirement
	Retirement Home
	Some people think of getting old

Another way to look at it is visually.



Think of ALL POSSIBLE ANGLES

The Difference between men and women when they age?
The difference between being twenty and being 60
How you observe the world
How you look at relationships now

Let's take the dating app Plenty of Fish

If you're old what would be the name of that app for seniors?

✍️Exercise

Topic: Having a Baby

1. Women don't nurse in Beverly Hills, because…

2. I had a [Jewish, Catholic, Irish, Mexican, Colombian, Black, Hood, Trailer Park] Delivery.

3. I'm old. The last time I had sex… [Who? What? Where? Why? When? How?]

Now think: Is there an act-out for that?

Analogy.

✍️Exercise

Choose a Topic.

1. Focus on a single topic at a time.
2. Ask: Top 10 List? So Joke? Analogy?
3. List the topic using the listing technique above to try to open it up.
4. Look for the Angles.
5. Write the joke
6. Look for tags, toppers, act-outs

✍️Exercise - Analogy - Fleshing Out Your Flaws

1. **Define your Angle**
    a. Old?



b. Tired?
c. Lazy?
d. Distracted?
e. Too busy?
f. Clumsy
g. Awkward
h. Shy?

My Fashion is like…
My Junk is like…
My vagina is like…
My sex appeal is like…
In the bedroom I'm like…
Dating is like…