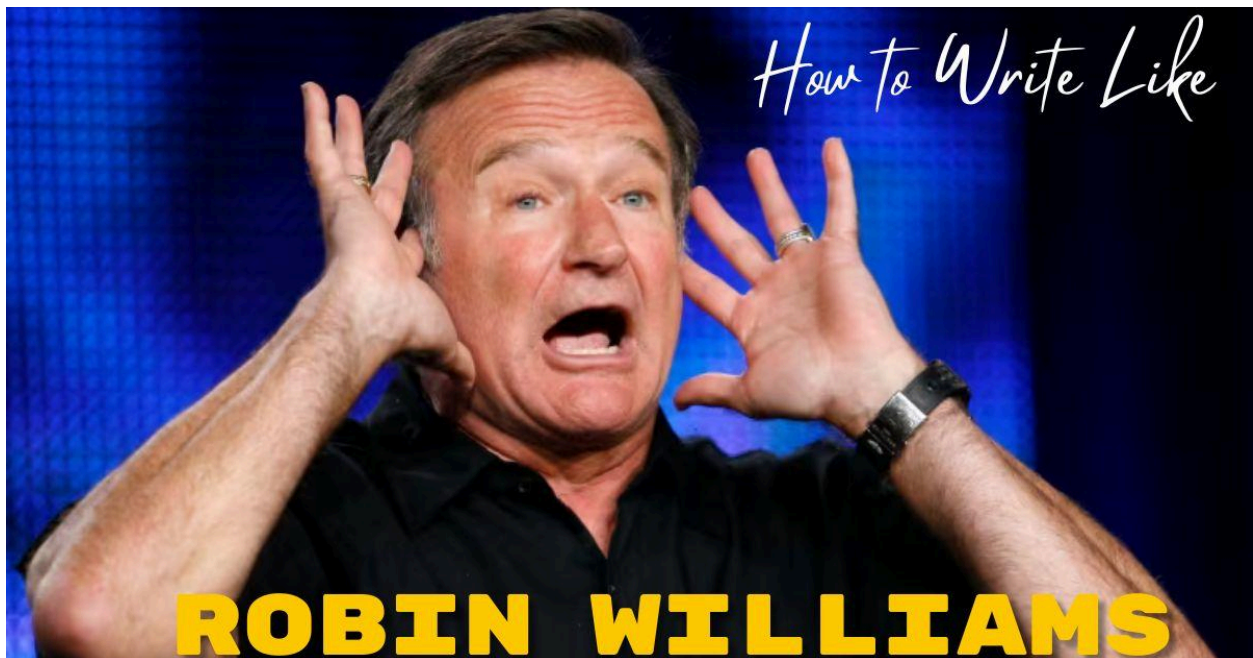




“Comedian and Academy Award–winning actor Robin Williams was so wildly inventive and spontaneous that he made up all his riffs and routines on the fly. Or at least, that was the legend...”

How to Write Comedy Like Robin Williams



Let's Watch

▶ Robin Williams stand-up - Soccer and The French

Trying to characterize Robin Williams “is like trying to catch lightning in a butterfly net,” as James Lipton describes him on [Inside the Actor's Studio](#).

Robin Williams is unlike any other comedian in our modern history of comedy. To really understand him we are going to have to watch him in action then deconstruct. But to fully

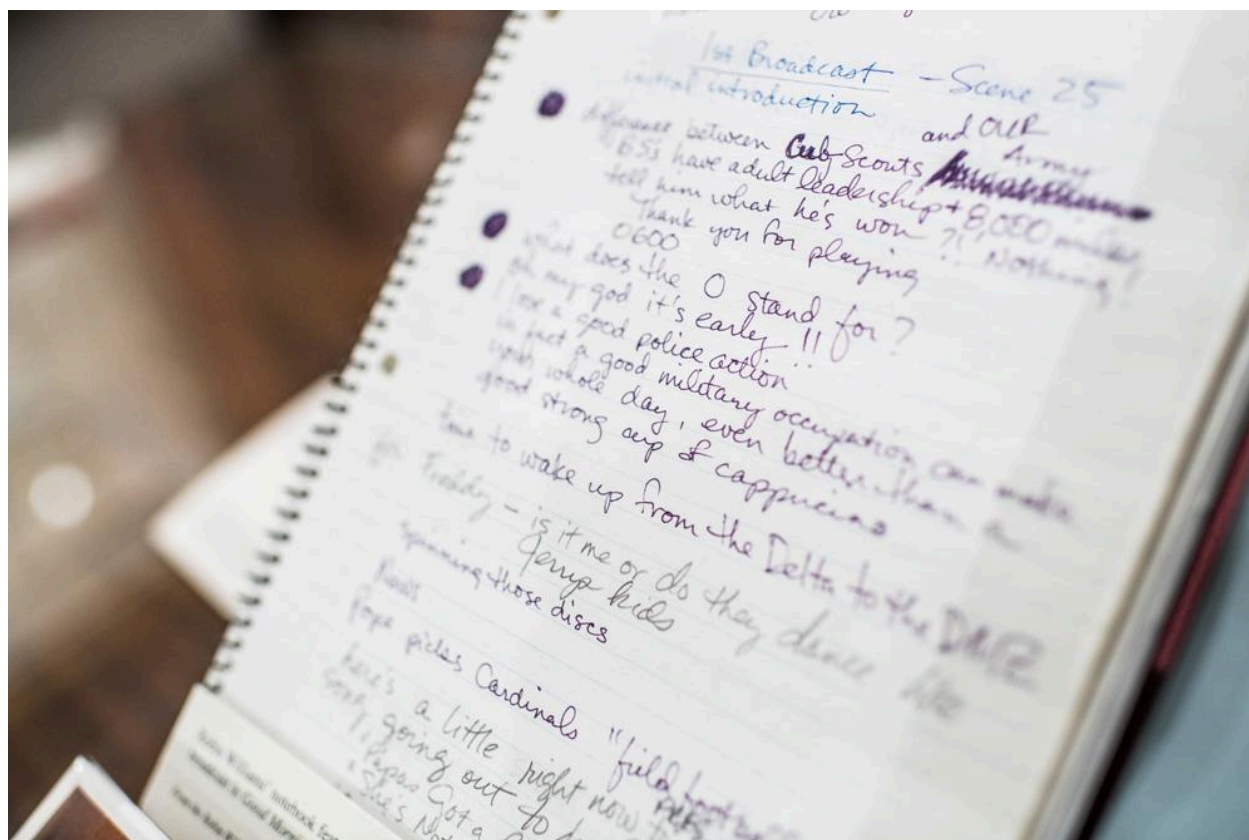


understand Robin Williams we can't just deconstruct his act. We have to deconstruct him, his background, his training, his approach.

When I first decided to cover Robin Williams and how he writes I knew that a lot of people would immediately say something like, "Robin Williams doesn't write. He just goes off!" But that's not completely true.

I worked with Robin a couple of times and I would see Robin's notes. Robin was very organized in his life and he approached his work meticulously and methodically, even when he got to the stage. But we don't see that because we see this pure performer allowing every impulse to affect him.

Most people think that Robin Williams just got up on stage and brilliantly riffed all his sets off the top of his head, but I worked with Robin on several occasions and got to see some of his preparation while on tour.





Robin would write his set list (the names of the bits and pieces and the order of the way they would appear in his show) and he would rehearse the bits just like everyone else.

But Robin Williams had a secret that few other comedians have...

Early Training and Preparation

Robin started like many of us, doing voices and bits for his mother to try to gain attention. He enrolled in drama class in High School and was in school plays throughout his early education.

He was a funny kid in school.

Williams was one of only 20 students accepted into the Juilliard School of the Arts in New York. Where he made a big impression.

His friends were amazed at how he stood out with his bounce-off-the-walls energy and his ability to do voices.

He studied accents and dialects with the famous Edith Skinner, who was amazed early on by Williams' **seemingly natural ability**.

But if you go back and look at Williams' early life. He was left alone a lot as a child and at a significant point in his life, 12-years-old, his family moved to a huge 40-room farmhouse on 20 acres in Bloomfield, Michigan. Both his parents worked and he spent most of his time with his family's maid.

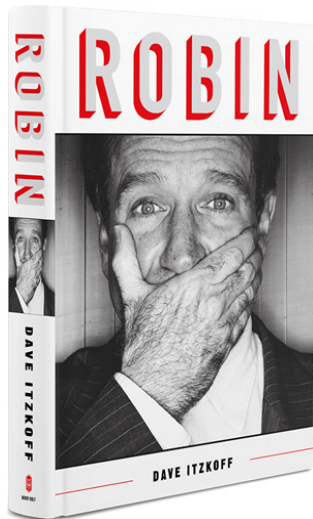
This is significant because just as Seinfeld was left alone a lot with his parents' TV and Rosie O'Donnell grew up glued to the TV, Williams was an avid TV and movie watcher.

As a preteen he had to create his own friends and would perform voices and characters on the huge farm property he grew up on.

Watch Robin's interview on [Inside the Actor's Studio](#) and see how he goes right into character upon his entrance. Count how many characters he does right at the start.

Keep in mind that these characters are not just coming off the top of his head. He has practiced and trained for these characters. You can do the same and you can do them while you are developing your other comedic skills.

You really want to get some clear insight into Robin Williams get Dave Itzkoff's book Robin.



<https://amzn.to/3W5X0Eb>

Formal Training

Williams formal training began when he went to Juilliard School for Dramatic Arts.

Juilliard is unlike any other school for drama. You learn to open yourself up. To stay in the moment to be open and recognize all the stimuli around you.

You learn:

- Character
- Dance
- Mask Work
- Movement
- Voice
- Scene Study
- Trust Exercises
- Improv
- Acting

As part of this course I think it's important, not to just look at the finished product but to look at everything that got Robin Williams to be Robin Williams. Juilliard School of Drama was a huge part of this training. It taught him to completely trust each moment and commit to it 100 percent.

▶ Juilliard Drama | A Day in the Life



Deconstructing Robin Williams

I find that one of the best ways to see how Robin Williams builds his sets is to watch him in interviews. You see all the skills he has honed over the years come together.

What makes up Robin Williams is really what's under the hood.

Background: Excellent student, who was well read.

Raised watching television because he spent a lot of time alone as his parents both worked.

He practiced cartoon voices, and character voices that he saw on TV. When you learn to do a few voices you begin to develop the skill to identify nuances and key inflection points that make up an accent or a dialect.

The more you practice outloud, the more you can jump in and out of those character voices.

Robin was also very up to speed on the socio-cultural and socio-political aspects of society.

So when he speaks on certain subjects, topics, premises the premises start out serious and then evolve into the funny based on the simple truth of the situation he is talking about.

Robin Williams is Insecure

One thing that a lot of people don't know about Robin Williams is that he's massively insecure. The irony being that Juilliard, despite its training to build confident actors, still didn't build a confident human.

As a performing comedian, this was a blessing for Robin because Robin was forced to constantly do characters. He had no choice.

It was not only his defense mechanism, it was his *survival mechanism*.

There's a saying in business: *If you want to breathe as much as you want to succeed, you will succeed.*

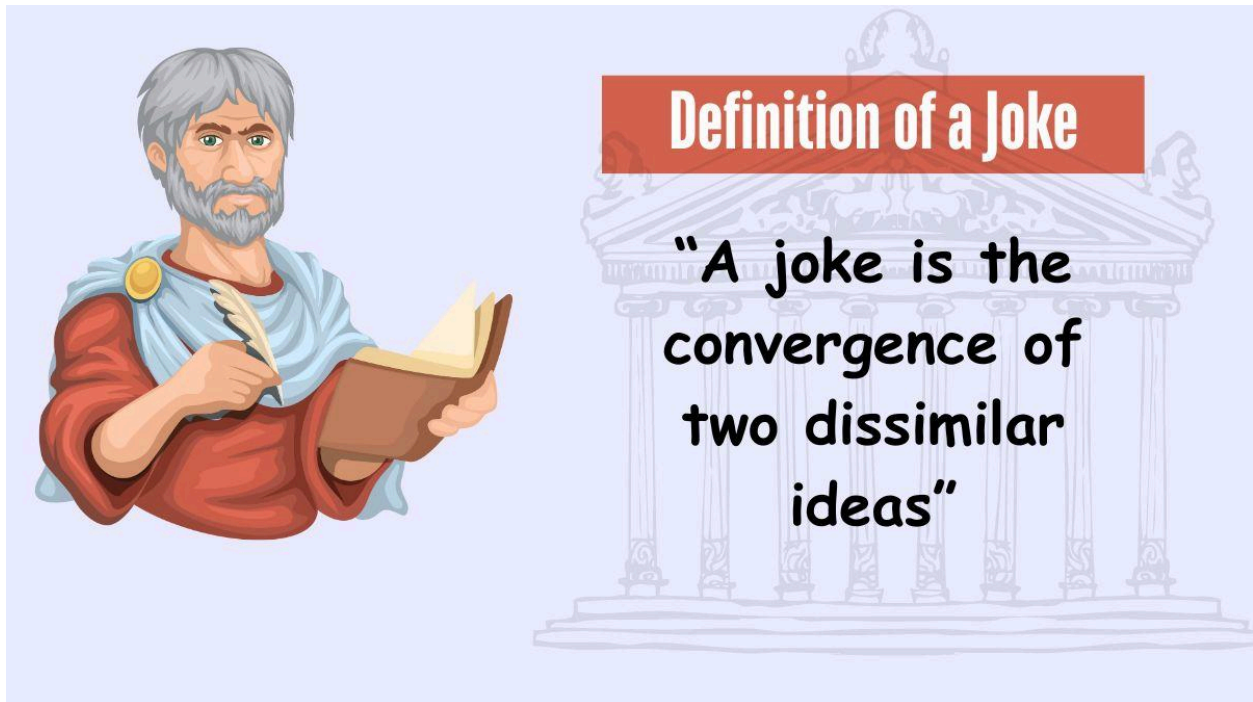
Robin's character's were his oxygen.

Just watch how Robin deals with being interviewed on Inside the Actor's Studio

Inside The Actors Studio with guest Robin Williams

He uses the Character + Filter strategy to develop a bit.

In comedy you've probably heard me talk about the original definition of a joke.



Upon almost any entrance Robin Williams makes he immediately goes big and allows himself to get an inspiration. That inspiration usually turns into a character, an accent

Character + Setting

Character + Situation

Character + Outside Stimuli

Situation + Character + Act Out

Robin Started Learning about performing comedy on stage formally through Improv classes in Juilliard

When he was doing characters with his fellow classmates for survival, he didn't see that as something that could convert to a stage performance.

Just watch Robin Williams in this interview with Charlie Rose and see this in action:

https://youtu.be/-ZMsZUyjXdg?si=cOobSnax9y_PFfWq&t=232



When you watch this you get to slow it down and if you really study this you get to see what Robin does.

Situation + Listing + Analogy + Character + Act-Outs

Robin Started Stand-up Comedy in a Comedy Class

This might be a surprise to most, but Robin Williams started doing **stand-up comedy in a comedy class at a church**. After leaving Juilliard, Robin Williams found himself back in his hometown of San Francisco, but he couldn't find work as an actor. Then he saw something for a comedy workshop in a church and decided to give it a shot. "So I went to this workshop in the basement of a Lutheran church, and it was stand-up comedy, so you don't get to improvise with others, but I started off doing, ostensibly, it was just like improvising but solo," he **told NPR**. "And then I started to realize, 'Oh.' [I started] building an act from there."

This of course makes me laugh my ass off because to all the naysayers that say comedy classes don't work.

FYI: Arguably one of the greatest stand-up comedians of all time started in a comedy class.

So the next time someone says, "Comedy Classes don't work." You can simply say, "Robin Williams started in a comedy class."

Robin Williams' Revelation

When Robin Williams got into a comedy class in San Francisco.
Remember he had all this training in Improv
He had all this training doing accents, dialects, characters
He spent some years reading, rehearsing and acting in plays.
He took voice, movement, fencing,

 Robin Williams Live on Broadway - Biblical History



📺 Robin Williams on fatherhood

Flash Joke Writing

One of the things you can start to do that will help you be like a comedian in your everyday life is to heighten your senses to be aware of opportunities for comedy just like Robin Williams. The Key? Recognizing when 2 dissimilar ideas are converging. But not just any two dissimilar ideas. RELATABLE dissimilar ideas.

I just got a text: It said, "Robert De Niro and Bruce Springsteen are rallying for Joe Biden"

Take 5 minutes and write me a joke or an act-out of how that might play out. Keep in mind that there has to be a common realm of knowledge. The topics and situations have to be familiar or relatable.

Use:

Compare & Contrast how does De Niro respond / How does Springsteen respond?

Incongruity De Niro + Politics + Condition (Joe Biden is old AF)

Springsteen + Politics + Condition (Joe Biden is old AF).

Is there an Act-Out What does that look like?

Set List Comedy without a Net

1. Characters, Character Voices, Accents
2. Take a Character and put him/her in a relatable (usually opposite of expected setting or situation) act it out. Go big or go home. Fully committed. No apologies.
 - a. Add wordplay
 - b. Asides
 - c. Sound effects
3. Read. Be familiar with History, Literature, Art.

Robin Williams was also excellent with utilizing the typical Sketch Comedy Structure.

1. **Establish Premise** - by introducing a secondary idea to the main idea.
2. **Comedic Setup** - Use the maxim of the 5w's to create a clear situation



- a. Who? (Character)
- b. What? (Problem / Dilemma to be solved)
- c. Where? (Location / Setting / Environment)
- d. Why? (What obstacle or objection is imposed on the main character)
- e. When? (Time / Day / Era)
- f. How? (What creative or exaggerated solutions does the character use to solve the problem?)

3. Build/Heighten Action / Raise Stakes

- a. What else? What else is there around me?
- b. What happens if? What is the response when I say or do something?

4. Resolution - Callback. Problem solved.

Character / Situation + Filter (Condition) + Act Out

Robin would often take a subject. I.e: The World Cup then choose a character to play, (Referee) then show the audience through compare and contrast how different characters (referees with different nationalities, would call certain fouls during the soccer match).

Training

As a performer you should develop your skills in several areas. Just as an actor would.

- Vocal Training (Singing, Dynamic Ranges, Vocal Support)
- Character voices (cartoon types)
- Learn 5-10 Accents, dialects
- Dance - Movement
- Voice and Diction
- Improv - Learning to be purely in the moment with utter commitment to stay in the bit.

Accents:

You can learn accents by studying with an accent coach. For the sake of comedy however you can learn the key indicators or key sounds that are key to that particular accent.

One terrific place to study is the Actors Academy YouTube Channel.



Accents Playlist: Here is the accent playlist for this channel.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLzq3_KSDNgb8Wy5nbrrH9YQCd7cYqVk35

It has:

- Russian
- French
- Australian
- American
- Southern
- British
- Irish

With some quick research you can find help on almost any accent you want to learn. It just takes commitment and practice.

Practice:

“That’s Not All Bob” Improv exercise with you and a friend. You stand in front of a camera that is recording you or live streaming. You are Bob. Your trusty assistant collects 4 or 5 Objects that are well-known.

Possibilities:

- A glass ashtray
- A catcher’s mitt
- Two long neck beer bottles
- A hand mixer

Bob stands in front of the camera. He is a world-class on-camera salesman. The exercise starts with Bob.

BOB: Welcome to “Is That All Bob?” A live infomercial where Me Bob, Your host will introduce you to the newest items to hit the marketplace since since, well, the last time I pitched the newest items to you. Keep in mind I have not seen these items before. My trusty assistant Dippy Dan--

ASSISTANT (O.C.): My name’s William.

BOB: Like I said, My trusty assistant Ball-Busting Ben, will give the products to me and I will sell them to you for something other than what they appear to be.



For example if my trusty assistant--Doofus Dave--gives me a silk flower I might try to sell it to you as a French Tickler. Sounds easy but the last time I did that it wasn't silk it was a rose with thorns. Let me just say, (FRENCH ACCENT) It did not tickle and I could not sit for an entire week.

You'll also notice I have a countdown clock. I have 30 seconds to sell this item to you.

And if I fail, my trusty assistant Gagging Greg, will use the thorny rose on me as he did last week.

So let's start with the first item. It's what appears to be a vintage glass ashtray.



Take 90 seconds to write as many ideas of what this can be besides a vintage glass ashtray along with its possible uses.

WILLIAM: (SHOUTS O.C.) Is that all Bob?

BOB: That's not all! We also have...

From O.C. Will throws an object to Bob. Bob--hopefully--catches it. We see...



A Catcher's Mitt. (But what else can it be?)

We notice the specifics:

Genuine Antique Tobacco Leather

Professional Model

Hand Sewn

Take 90 seconds and write down what this can be and what its uses are?

Next item: Two long-neck beer bottles.



Take 90 seconds and sell them for anything other than what they are.



Vintage Manual Hand Mixer



90 Seconds: Sell this to us as anything other than what it is.

Set List - Comedy Without a Net

Introduced by Paul Provenza on TV. The idea was precisely how Robin Williams saw stand-up back when he first started after Juilliard. He said, "It's improv by yourself."

▶ ROBIN WILLIAMS: The Introvert Dictator - Set List: Stand-Up Without a Net

Set List is where a comedian stands on stage alone and is given a premise. The comedian has 1-minute to play it out.

But in this room we will write it out and if we have time hear some of your takes on these Set List Premises

You can also practice these at home.

One of the problems with Set List is that it got too clever for itself.



THE KEY TO COMEDY IS... **RELATABILITY**

Once the show got too clever and stopped showing us stuff that made any sense. Audiences didn't feel like they could play along. Comedians felt like it was gibberish.

Why is "Introverted Dictator" so popular? Because it contained two almost opposing ideas but each of the ideas is relatable.

Relatable Idea + Condition or Filter (Situation, Setting, Dilemma, Obstacle) + ACT-OUT

Examples:



INTROVERTED DICTATOR

"I SWITCHED MOM'S
PRESCRIPTIONS"





MAGNETIC
CONDOM
NIGHT



Homeless Sex in the City

