



"I know... I'm in the future also..." is easily one of the greatest comedic quotes"

-- Mike Birbiglia

How to Write Comedy Like Mike Birbiglia



Class Breakdown

This is not a “write jokes” class.

This is a **story-engineering** class.

Birbiglia doesn't fire punchlines. He's not a gun slinger.

He's almost like an anti-comedian.



He walks the audience into a memory,

Birbiglia is like:

- **Spalding Gray** (long-form monologist, introspective)
- **David Sedaris** (personal essays with ironic distance)
- **Garrison Keillor** (gentle Midwestern storytelling tone)
- **Nat Bargoutze**

But Birbiglia's key distinction is:

He builds stories for the stage, not the page.

The laughs are engineered—not accidental—even though they feel discovered.

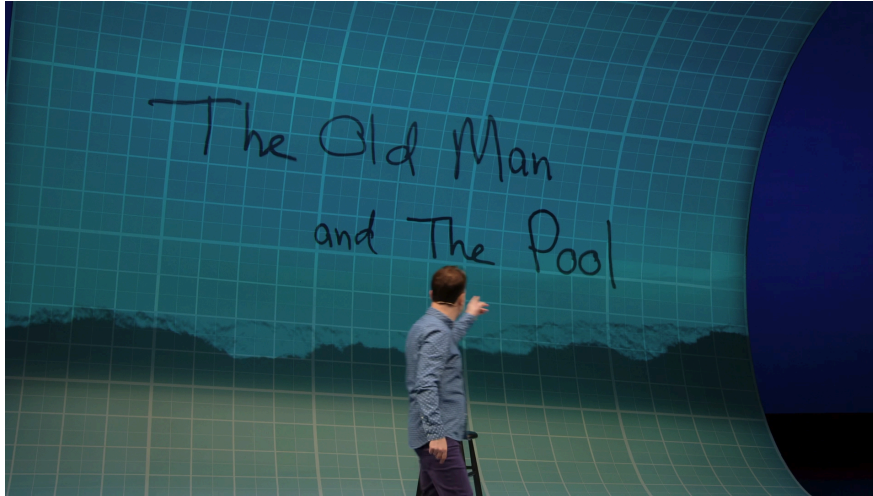
Mike Birbiglia – Stand-Up Specials / One-Man Shows

- Comedy Central Presents: Mike Birbiglia — 2003
- Sleepwalk with Me — 2009
- My Girlfriend's Boyfriend — 2013
- Thank God for Jokes — 2017
- The New One — 2019
- The Old Man and the Pool — 2023

▶ **Mike Birbiglia - My Girlfriends Boyfriend (2013) FULL SH...**



Old Man and the Pool. (First 10 minutes)



One-Man-Show Development (Short Description)

A one-man show is **not a long stand-up set**.

It's a **theatrical narrative built from real experiences**, designed to unfold like a short film onstage.

Instead of chasing laughs moment-to-moment, the performer builds:

- a **central question** (fear, identity, regret, love, mortality)
- a series of **scenes** connected by memory and meaning
- an **emotional arc** that resolves by the end of the show

Laughter becomes a **by-product of recognition and relief**, not punchlines.

The audience leans in because the story *matters*, not because a joke is coming.

Mike Birbiglia's shows evolve through:



- live performance
- rewriting from audience response
- adding reflection *after* the events
- shaping stories into acts, not bits

Techniques Mike Birbiglia Uses in Storytelling

1. Scene-Based Storytelling

He builds moments with:

- time
- place
- emotional state

The audience sees the story, not just hears it.

2. Analogy as the Laugh Trigger

Instead of punchlines, he uses:

- comparisons
- metaphors
- emotional equivalence

The laugh happens when the analogy explains the feeling better than logic could.

3. Simple Truth

Birbiglia looks takes certain phrases like chiasmus and examines them for their simple truth (explicit) definition. Like in “Old Man and the Pool,” Birbiglia says, “*I have a lot of pre-existing conditions. Which is a condition that exists obviously and it’s “pre” because it’s anything that happened before the appointment.*”

4. Delayed Realization



He tells the story from the mindset of *who he was then*, allowing the audience to understand the mistake before he does.

That gap creates laughter.

5. Retrospective Reflection

He steps outside the story to:

- question his own thinking
- admit confusion or fear
- reframe past decisions

This replaces traditional tags.

6. Improv-Driven Exploration

You can feel his improv background in:

- loose pacing
- conversational delivery
- curiosity instead of certainty

He discovers meaning onstage rather than announcing it.

7. Understated Delivery

Big stakes, calm tone.

Danger, fear, or heartbreak are delivered casually, which heightens the comedy through contrast.

8. Thematic Callbacks



Callbacks aren't just funny—they **advance the emotional arc**:

- repeated fears
- recurring beliefs
- evolving perspectives

The final callback feels like closure, not a punchline.

8. Audience Recognition Over Surprise

The biggest laughs come from:

“Oh wow... I've done that.”

He prioritizes **shared experience** over cleverness.

Core Teaching Takeaway

Birbiglia doesn't write jokes.

He writes **memories, questions, and realizations**—

and lets laughter happen when the audience recognizes themselves inside the story



From the producers of **This American Life**

Mike Birbiglia Lauren Ambrose
sleepwalk with me

A FILM BY MIKE BIRBIGLIA



"A funny and insightful movie.
I could have watched it for ten hours."
- Judd Apatow

"One of the best films ever made
on the subject of stand-up comedy."
- Jacob S. Hall, *Movies.com*

"Not just the funniest movie that I
saw at Sundance, but the funniest
movie that I've seen in the last year."
- Mike Ryan, *Moviefone*



A comedy for anyone who's ever had a dream. And then jumped out a window.

Who Is Mike Birbiglia?

Mike Birbiglia came up through the traditional stand-up pipeline—open mics, clubs, radio sets—but he didn't *break* through as a joke machine.

He broke through as **a confessional narrator who accidentally stumbled into comedy gold.**

His rise really crystallized with:



- **Sleepwalk With Me** (stage show → book → indie film)
- Followed by deeply personal specials like *My Girlfriend's Boyfriend*, *Thank God for Jokes*, and *The Old Man and the Pool*

What made him popular wasn't speed, edge, or topicality.
It was this feeling the audience kept having:

"Wait... this isn't a joke. This is my life."

The idea being, instead of worrying about telling a joke. Tell the truth. Then identify opportunities for:

- Wordplay - Double Entendre
- Assumptions that can be shattered (reverses)
- Two dissimilar ideas converging.
- He said/She said opportunities
- Callbacks
- Irony

And then—laughing out of recognition and embarrassment.

Exercise: Write a 1-3 minute Story

Story must contain: 1-3 of these structures.

- A theme.
- Reframing a fact, metaphor or idiomatic phrase or technical term. (simple truth)
- An act out
- An analogy
- Compare & Contrast.
- Irony



First Draft - Story

This is my attempt at a first draft concept story. As I was brainstorming an idea, my brain took me to different places. I wrote down each one.

The first one was dealing with age. The next one was the weather and how meteorologists use different names for storms to make them sound dramatic. Then my brain took me to my divorce. That's what I decided to write about.

I left the other two on the page so you can see that my brain doesn't always focus right away. I tried to get as much of the process on the page as possible.

I'm getting old. The other day I tried to take a dick pic. But I couldn't get it... to "pose" properly. But I didn't freak out or anything-- I'm sure it has happened to everyone else at that Chuck E. Cheese.

They have such bizarre names for storms these days. Atmospheric River, Bomb Cyclone. Polar Vortex. I want to experience a bi-polar vortex. You know, where it's really hot, then ice cold. If I was a meteorologist I would give that a better name. Like, My girlfriend. "It's going to be dry, but then we're going to be hit with My Girlfriend. It's going to be hot, then really really ice cold. So stay indoors, don't drive unless absolutely necessary, and definitely wear your rubbers."

I could do a story about:

I don't understand my wife--well, soon to be ex-wife. I think the divorce should be finalized by now... I should look that up. The reason we divorced--at least according to the court papers was irreconcilable differences. Which loosely means she hated me.

That started to become clear only during certain parts of the relationship...like anytime we talked. She hates being wrong. My therapist called it an "Ego Threat" or "Ego Defense."



See I was raised that being wrong is good. Mistakes are gold. That's where you learn the most about yourself. I was taught this by my parents. And I always wanted to please my parents so I leaned into being wrong.

*I would be like, "Hmmm! I think I'm wrong. I AM Wrong! Hooray! 😊"
And in a weird way admitting I was wrong meant I was right and that would piss her off even more.*

Fast Forward.

NOTES: Infantilize women by calling them "girls." I'd be like she should know me better than that.

Then calling her out when she had friends over and said, "When are the girls getting together again?"

When I called her out on that she said, "Well that's different."

I said, "Why is that different?"

She said, "Because I am a woman and women should be treated differently. You're dumb for even bringing that up."

I said, "That's not like you to say that women are not equal to men."

She said, "I never said that."

I said, "By saying that women should live by a different set of rules than men, you are kinda saying that."

She paused for a second, then said, "I fucking hate you."

NOTE: (Possible inclusion) Saying I'm not sure how many of the pilots fighting the fires are females. And she attacked me for that.

Then after we separated. My daughter was at my house and said she couldn't go to school because she had really bad cramps. I said, "Take some ibuprofen and go back to bed." I texted her mom and told her. She came back at me with "Cramps are no reason to stay home from school." I said, "She seemed to be in



pain. You're probably right but I was treading carefully because if I said that "Cramps are no reason to stay home from school," you might accuse me of being sexist again."

She said, "When did I ever accuse you of being sexist?"

That time where you accused me of infantilizing women by sharing a story about women and I said, "And then the girls were like...." "And that time when I said that Hillary Clinton should learn to modulate her voice, then gave you the science behind certain frequencies that aggravate the human ear, and that time, during the big fires, when they were showing the water-dropping planes and I said 'I wonder if any of the pilots are females.

And that time...

She cut me off by waving her hand at me then pausing and saying, "I fucking hate you."

That's where being proven wrong = **threat to self-image**.

My therapist calls it: **Narcissistic Injury**.

Being wrong triggers:

- Shame
- Rage
- Humiliation

Especially common in people with fragile self-esteem

Response patterns:

- Explosive anger
- Contempt
- Smearing the other person



- “You’re stupid for even questioning me”

She does all of those.

We were obviously reaching a place where we couldn’t have a conversation. Hence, the “Irreconcilable differences.”

My complication as a writer here is to make sure I’m just trying to figure it out. I’m not trying to cast blame on my soon to be ex-wife. I’m trying to explain while framing the antagonist and protagonist. (Because that’s necessary for storytelling).

Like I’m not saying I’m NOT flawed and that I don’t make mistakes and bad choices. I’m saying that I try to acknowledge when I do. And I’ve never said, “I hate you. I fucking hate you.” That kind of language really frames an antagonist.

And it stacks and escalates when I try to rationalize the argument with logic and not emotion. This really makes her angry, especially when I’m right. And then when I’m wrong and I laugh and I go. “Woah! I gotta eat some big fat crow on that one, I was totally wrong!”

Also having the therapist pose certain psychological philosophies allows me to have the ideas imposed on me rather than it just being me against my ex.

One-Sentence Birbiglia Approach

Birbiglia-style one-man stories move from confusion → worldview clash → repeated proof → reflective reframe & callback.

No punchlines required.

The audience laughs because they recognize themselves somewhere in the pattern.



Exercise 3: Let the Audience See It First

Goal: Create laughter through delayed realization. The audience recognizes the narrator's mistake before the narrator does.

1. Choose a true moment when you misunderstood a person, a rule, or yourself.
2. Set the scene in three lines: Where were you? What did you want? What did you believe was happening?
3. Write down **three clues** that your belief was wrong. Put them in the order you noticed them at the time.
4. Turn the clues into a short scene. After each clue, show what you *thought it meant then*. Stay inside your earlier mindset.
5. Once the audience has had time to figure it out, write the moment when you finally understood.
6. Add one sentence from your present-day perspective: What do you understand about yourself now?

Try it aloud: Tell the scene without announcing the lesson at the start. Mark the point where a listener realizes what you have missed. That gap is an opportunity for a laugh, an act-out, or a quiet look.

Story check: Does the audience have enough information to get ahead of you? Is your mistaken belief understandable, even if it is embarrassing?

Exercise 4: The Callback That Changes Meaning

Goal: Turn a repeated detail into both a comic pattern and an ending.

1. Pick a story built around a question or conflict, such as *Why do I always try to please everyone?* or *Why was I so afraid to admit I was wrong?*
2. Find a small, concrete detail from the opening: a phrase someone said, an object, a rule you followed, or a promise you made.
3. Bring that detail back in **three different scenes**:



- **First appearance:** Establish what it means to you.
 - **Second appearance:** Let it cause trouble or reveal a pattern.
 - **Final appearance:** Return to it after something in your understanding has changed.
4. Write a brief reflection between the second and final appearances. What did you believe then, and what do you believe now?
 5. Perform the story and test whether the final callback gives the audience a laugh, recognition, or emotional closure. Rewrite it until the return feels earned.

Story check: If you remove the final callback, does the ending lose meaning? If it does, the detail is doing real story work.

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