“I want to tell my friend the truth. I also want to keep my friend.”
-- George Carlin, until he realized that he didn’t need friends.

“If you have the right voice and the right delivery, you're cocky enough, and you pound down on the punch line, you can say anything and make people laugh maybe three times before they realize you're not telling jokes.”

— Buddy Hackett

How to Find Great Topics for Jokes Pt. 2



Comedy Basics

Before we get started we should quickly review some comedy basics.
Whether we’re doing jokes or stories we have to realize that every joke is a story.



Every story has 5 Essential Elements:

- Character
- Setting
- Theme
- Plot
- Conflict

Let's briefly identify each:
Character - Who are we talking about? Is this a story about you and a spouse, family member, pet, nemesis, teacher, boss, etc.?

Theme - the subject matter. Is it relatable? Can the audience identify with it? Is it familiar? Common Realm of Knowledge

Setting - In a story we usually want to know where this is taking place. The two primary things an audience imagines in a story is Who is in the story and Where are they? Sometimes in comedy we want to keep some of those details hidden to use as a surprise later. *"My father is a bit eccentric. I remember when he went to dinner with me and the kids. He got into it with the manager about how the cabernet was of poor quality. And that's why we are no longer allowed in Chuck E. Cheese."*

Plot - What this is about. What's going on? The plot engages all the other elements to give the story momentum and texture and tell an audience why they should care.

Conflict - EVERY story needs some kind of conflict. This doesn't mean there needs to be a fight. It just means there needs to be an obstacle. Every story should have something imposed on the hero or the main character by an outside force or something within themselves. Clumsiness, Awkwardness, Shyness, Laziness, etc.

Once you understand this, it makes it easier to write jokes and bits.

Most people think jokes are about being funny. Most jokes are about finding a funny solution to a problem.

The problem doesn't always have to be stated. It could be implied or dropped on your lap. Steven Wright just drops it on your lap, sometimes as non-sequiturs:



“I put a humidifier and a de-humidifier in the same room and let ‘em fight it out.”

“What do you say we go out back at this part of the show and sniff some glue?”

You could even start by saying, “*They say that every joke is a story and should start with a topic that creates curiosity. So I’m going to do my best tonight to start that way.”*

Does that statement have you interested?

Has it started with a challenge? “They” have imposed an obstacle on this person.

A Hook? - We’re curious right away to how the speaker is going to accomplish this

5 Essentials of a Good Setup

1. A setup is intended to provide information. It is not intended to be funny. It can be funny, quirky weird or interesting (that's heightening curiosity), but its intention is to set the stage, hence the term set up.
2. A set up should make the audience feel some kind of emotion about the information. The emotion doesn't have to be big. It could be simple curiosity.
    1. Accomplishments
        1. 6 months sober
        2. At 19 I played professional soccer
        3. I have 5 kids
    2. Failures and Flaws
        1. My father was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer
        2. I'm a lazy lover
3. Presents an interesting puzzle, paradox or irony
4. The audience should be able to relate to the subject or the situation or experience. Like if you're doing a joke about quantitative easing in the U.S. economy, the audience doesn't know what that is, so they won't care. So give them something they can relate to.
5. A story, topic or subject that causes the audience to reminisce.



1. When I was eight, I used to hate spending the night at my friend Tony's house.
2. I was a teenage alcoholic
3. I think Sesame Street could be a great way to teach kids about safe sex. (Juxtaposition)
4. Fireworks are illegal almost everywhere it seems. I remember when I was 8 years old in New York, we used to get our fireworks from this kid we called Petey. He was Italian. His dad owned a deli that never really had a lot of foot traffic. Petey got all the best fireworks, by the time I was 12, we called him "3-fingered Petey."

Stop telling jokes and tell me something interesting, then use structure to tighten to the punch, tag, act-out, topper.

NOTE: You can come up with a setup that is a joke and also sets your dilemma, theme, etc. For example, when I was doing a set about my failing marriage, I would open with:
“So I’m in love…” (APPLAUSE, NEXT BEAT)
“Don’t tell my wife.”

Narrowing Your Focus

There are so many things to talk about in comedy, it’s probably not for a lack of topics to talk about, but too many things to talk about, so you have to get disciplined and narrow down what you want to talk about.

I think about the psychology of the audience. What are they looking for?

The audience is looking for the answer to the dramatic question: *Who are you and why should we care?* And your job is to keep them interested enough to wait for the answer again and again and again.

There are 2 Primary Ways to Look at Topics

1. Facts, truths, admissions, statements about ourselves.

2. Facts, observations, ironies outside of ourselves.

You don't have to do one or the other. But deciding is key to getting to material.

I use a calendar and map out my writing strategy for the day. Time-blocking is essential. I might start with an exercise where I'm just looking for words that sound like other words and can be misplaced. I might look at facts or a news headline that is ironic or hypocritical, especially if it comes from an authoritative source.

For example: I just read this headline:

Google cofounder Sergey Brin has spent $102 million to fight California's proposed billionaire tax—he could owe $13 billion if he loses



That made me laugh. The irony! Where is it? *Sergey Brin is worth 267.7 Billion dollars! Most people can't math numbers at that level. I'd ask the audience: Does anyone know what .7 represents? 700 Million dollars. His decimal points are worth more than this entire room… and probably 20 buildings on the Sunset Strip.*

And that would just be a start of a rant that I might do to totally bury this guy comedically. What does that topic have that makes it so good?

1. An astounding amount of money.
2. New and interesting information
    a. Most people don't know Sergey Brin is the co-founder of Google.
    b. Most people don't know that he's like the 5th richest man in the world.
    c. The amount of money he spent to fight the billionaire tax is a lot.



    d. The amount of money he might lose is a lot. (until you put it into perspective to the amount of money he's worth).
3. It addresses survival, money, taking care of people, while tearing down the ultra-wealthy.
4. It contains an antagonist in the story, especially if I write him that way.
5. It gives the audience someone to root against.
6. The decimal observation is also a joke, because 267.7 billion dollars is one way to say the amount, but pointing out that .7 is $700 million (in that figure) and if that's true, what else is true, but the audience doesn't see it? Sergey Brin's decimal point is richer than all of us in the room.
7. In fact, in the last 9 months, Sergey's Wealth increased by 25 Billion Dollars! So that 13 Billion doesn't even impact his total net worth. He'll fart and make it back again.
8. Think about how dumb that is to fight that. Wouldn't a better headline be Sergey Brin says he'll gladly pay 13 Billion Dollars as part of California's Billionaire Tax to help "Pull the Wagon," that made it possible for him to earn that kind of wealth."

And when you point out to the audience the absurd amount of money that this guy is worth and how it would literally mean nothing to him to pay a one-time 5 percent tax on his wealth to give back to the very infrastructure that made it possible for you to make that kind of money and you're fighting against it really points out to the audience that this guy is a heartless prick.

To double down, I might do a quick search to find out how much Sergey Brin donated to charitable causes, etc. to really paint a picture of the ridiculousness of his spending to fight the tax.

But the point is you find things that are high stakes and in this case there's such a backlash against billionaires, you really have a topic that the audience can get on board with.

Another way to start is to just start listing facts about what's going on in your life. What are the observations you've made that need to be addressed?

Let's walk through some steps in how to approach that when you're staring at a blank page and you have a million ideas hitting your brain at the same time.

George Carlin School of Comedy

I come from the George Carlin School of Comedy:

▶ It took me 33+ years to realize what George Carlin will tell you in 10 minutes…

Mark Normand Says:

“Sometimes I just try to write a joke about something they say you can’t do jokes about. Like abortion, rape, religion, pedophilia…”

Mark Normand - Pedophile Joke

https://youtube.com/shorts/gJ1DNWZjC9E?si=B7OzgdydDMCUc-no

Let’s Watch Some Openings

▶ **Classic Gulman: Do Not Go On Shark Tank To Pitch Your Idea**

A topic doesn’t have to sound funny before you write about it. It needs to give you something to say—and give the audience a reason to listen.

Great topics can come from your own experiences, something you read, a conversation, a strange fact, or a familiar rule that suddenly doesn’t make sense.

First, Understand What You’re Writing

Most jokes contain three primary elements:

1. **Topic**



2. **Angle**
3. **Punchline**

But when we're developing material, it helps to distinguish the following:

Subject: The broad category you're discussing.

Topic or premise: The specific condition, situation, or observation within that subject.

Angle: What you think or feel about it.

Opening or setup: The words that bring the audience into the idea.

Punchline: The turn that produces the laugh.

For example:

Subject: Customer service.

Premise: A company asks me to rate its service before it has solved my problem.

Angle: I feel pressured to congratulate someone who hasn't helped me.

Opening:
"My internet company asked me to rate their service while I was still waiting for service."

Now we have something specific to investigate.

"Customer service" gives us a category. **The specific situation gives us material.**

Five Elements of Story

Five useful elements for understanding a story are:

1. Character
2. Theme
3. Setting
4. Plot
5. Conflict



These help us ask:

- Who is involved?
- What is this about?
- Where does it happen?
- What happens?
- What gets in the way?

A short joke may imply several of these elements. You don't have to explain all five before getting to the point.

Give the audience the information they need to understand the situation and follow your thinking.

Top 10 Categories and Sources I Use for Material

1. Weird and Odd News
2. Current Events, Headlines, Celebrity Culture
3. Forums & Gossip Columns
4. Commercials and Advertisements
5. Wordplay & Literary Devices (Cliché Reformations & Take-Offs)
6. Life, Observations & Social Critiques
7. Watching Comedians & Comic Strips
8. Simple Truth (Quotes, Songs, Slogans, Branding Statements)
9. Structure Workouts (Practicing my Scales)
10. Reading Outside My Comfort Zone (Fact Apps, Magazines, Books)

News, Headlines, Odd News

Fark.com
Oddnews.com
refdesk.com
Huffpost.com

News / Headlines / Current Events



TheWeek.com
USAToday.com
refdesk.com

**Also check the Resources List on the Last Page.

Five Practical Checks for a Great Comedy Topic

These five checks organize the principles from *How to Write Great Set-ups* into a filter you can use while developing topics.

1. Clear Information

Can the audience quickly understand what you're talking about?

Give them a specific event, observation, belief, or problem.

Broad:
"Technology is weird."

Specific:
"My phone makes me prove I'm human before it lets me talk to another machine."

The second gives us a situation.

Ask yourself:
What specifically happened? What does the audience need to know?

2. An Emotional Response

How do you feel about the information?

What might the audience feel?

The emotion doesn't have to be big. Simple curiosity can be enough.

Possible emotional entry points include:



- Frustration
- Fear
- Embarrassment
- Pride
- Confusion
- Delight
- Relief
- Excitement
- Curiosity
- Cynicism

You need a reason to care. You don't need a reason to shout.

Ask yourself:
What bothered, surprised, pleased, embarrassed, or confused me?

3. A Reason to Hear the Next Sentence

Does the opening create a question the audience wants answered?

You can introduce:

- A contradiction
- A confession
- An unusual condition
- A dilemma
- A surprising detail
- A puzzle or paradox

General:
"My family gives me advice."

More compelling:
"My family's most confident marriage expert has been divorced three times."

Now we want to know what advice this person gives—and why anyone listens.

An open loop should promise something the bit actually delivers.



Ask yourself:
What will the audience want to know next?

4. A Human Connection

The audience doesn't have to share your exact experience. They need to understand the feeling or problem.

An unfamiliar subject becomes accessible when you connect it to familiar concerns:

- Money
- Approval
- Belonging
- Safety
- Fairness
- Inconvenience
- Control
- Family expectations
- Embarrassment

Explain an unfamiliar term only as far as the joke requires.

Ask yourself:
What familiar experience helps the audience understand this?

5. A Picture or a Memory

Can the audience picture the situation—or remember something similar?

Abstract:
"Parenting changes your behavior."

Concrete:
"I heard myself telling my daughter to take a jacket."

One specific detail can do more work than several abstract sentences.



Ask yourself:
What can the audience see? What might this make them remember?

The Quick Filter

1. What happened?
2. How do I feel?
3. Why keep listening?
4. Why would they care?
5. What can they picture?

These are diagnostic questions, not a requirement to cram five separate elements into every opening sentence.

Plausibility Supports the Topic

The audience should understand and accept the world of the bit.

Personal stories can compress events or exaggerate details. Factual claims need checking. An absurd persona may establish a different reality.

The question is:

Does this make sense within the situation I've established?

If the audience gets distracted trying to figure out whether the premise makes sense, they may stop following the joke.

From a Source to a Stage Opening

Use this sequence:

Source → Reaction → Personal Association → Specific Condition → Point of View → Spoken Opening

Example 1: Self-Help Advice



Source: Advice to set boundaries.

Reaction: That sounds easy until family is involved.

Personal association: A relative expects an immediate reply to a nonurgent text.

Specific condition: A delayed response gets treated as a personal rejection.

Point of view: Availability has become a test of affection.

Opening:
“I’m trying to set boundaries with my family. Apparently that means we’re fighting now.”

Run it through the filter:

- **Information:** Family boundaries.
- **Emotion:** Uneasiness.
- **Curiosity:** What happened?
- **Connection:** Family expectations.
- **Picture:** Still limited. A specific text or exchange could supply it in the next sentence.

Example 2: A List

Source: A list of subscriptions on my phone.

Reaction: I’m annoyed that I pay for things I barely use.

Personal association: I keep subscribing to services that promise to reduce stress.

Specific condition: I have to manage the services that are supposed to simplify my life.

Opening:
“I signed up for an app to simplify my life. Now I have another password, another bill, and notifications telling me to relax.”

Refine the Subject



Take a broad subject and find something specific within it:

Broad Subject	Look For
Aging	A change in an ability, habit, priority, or expectation
Dating	An interaction, rule, choice, fear, or contradiction
Work	A procedure that frustrates its intended purpose
Health	Something you struggle with, misunderstand, or rationalize

Three questions help:

1. What specifically happened?
2. What is strange about that?
3. What does it remind me of in my own life?

If a source produces no reaction, move on. You don't owe every interesting fact a joke.

George Carlin and the "Gotcha" Moment

Carlin's approach gives us a useful way to investigate topics: look for the gap between what people, institutions, or society say—and what they do.

That discovery can produce the feeling:

“Wait a minute. Those two things don’t go together.”

A stated value collides with actual behavior. A familiar expression falls apart when examined. A rule creates the problem it claims to solve.

How to Find the Gap

1. Write the stated belief, promise, or rule.
2. Write the observable behavior.
3. Put them side by side.
4. Identify who benefits and who pays.
5. Ask whether you do the same thing.
6. Find a concrete scene that reveals the contradiction.

Carlin Entry Line 1

“Think for a moment about the concept of the flame thrower.”

This makes a familiar invention suddenly questionable.

- **Information:** A weapon.
- **Emotion:** Discomfort and fascination.
- **Curiosity:** Why examine this particular invention?
- **Connection:** We understand wanting to solve a problem.
- **Picture:** An object and the distance it bridges.

Your prompt:
What familiar invention, practice, or procedure becomes strange when you examine the desire behind it?

Carlin Entry Line 2

“So I say live and let live.”

A familiar motto establishes an expectation of tolerance. The contradiction that follows gives the statement its comic purpose.

At the entry alone, curiosity is modest. The next beat matters.

Your prompt:
What behavior would contradict someone's claim to be tolerant, generous, honest, or reasonable?

Carlin Entry Line 3

"There's no 'now'."

A compact paradox creates a need for explanation.

- **Information:** A claim about time.
- **Emotion:** Confusion and curiosity.
- **Connection:** Everyone experiences time.
- **Picture:** Initially abstract; a demonstration can make it concrete.

Your prompt:
What everyday concept becomes difficult to define when you look closely?

Additional Study: Carlin's "Stuff"

Watch George Carlin — Stuff

The opening idea is that he wants to discuss possessions. Watch how an ordinary category becomes a particular view of how people organize their lives.

Discussion:
At what point does "possessions" become a specific claim we recognize?

Original Practice Example

"The company says my time is valuable. Their customer-service recording has been telling me that for forty minutes."

The contradiction is specific enough for the audience to recognize and picture.

Exercise 1: Find Your Own "Gotcha"

Choose a business, family rule, social norm, school, workplace, or personal habit.



A contradiction in your own behavior can be just as useful as one you notice in a system.

Choose a Prompt

- They say they value _____, but they make us _____.
- The rule is supposed to prevent _____, but it causes _____.
- I insist that I believe _____, but when _____ happens, I _____.
- They tell us to question everything, except _____.
- We praise _____ when one person does it and criticize it when _____ does it.

Develop the Idea

The stated promise, belief, or rule:

The specific behavior that conflicts with it:

The scene where I noticed it:

How I feel about it:

The audience's likely connection:

Write Your Stage Opening

Use one or two sentences. Give us the contradiction—or the scene that reveals it.



Check Your Work

- Is this a contradiction, or simply something I dislike?
- Have I represented the rule fairly?
- Can I support any factual claim?
- Where am I part of the problem?
- What will the audience want to know next?

Partner response:
"I want to hear more because _____."

Let's Study Five Comedian Openings

These are openings into particular bits, not necessarily the first words of an entire show.

Watch the topic entry. Pause before the payoff and identify what makes you willing to listen.

1. Jerry Seinfeld: New York

Watch the Seinfeld example

Entry excerpt:
"It's always a thrill being in New York city."

- **Information:** Location and pleasure.
- **Emotion:** Enthusiasm.
- **Curiosity:** Initially mild. The following contrast between change and enduring annoyances supplies direction.
- **Escalation:** Builds from curiosity to frustration.
- **Connection:** City life and familiar inconveniences.
- **Picture:** The city, followed by specific sights and smells.

Discussion:
What does the following sentence add that a generic greeting cannot?

Writing prompt:
Choose a familiar place. What changes there? What never seems to change?

2. Jim Gaffigan: Surprise Birthday Party

Watch the Gaffigan example

Entry:
“I was invited to a surprise birthday party.”

The next sentence specifies that the party was for a dog.

- **Information:** A social event.
- **Emotion:** Curiosity, followed by amusement or disbelief.
- **Curiosity:** Why celebrate this way?
- **Escalation:**
- **Connection:** Party obligations and pet owners.
- **Picture:** Guests gathered to celebrate an animal.

Discussion:
Which detail makes this more than a topic called “pets”?

Writing prompt:
Recall an ordinary event with one unexpected participant or rule.

3. Mitch Hedberg: Doughnut Receipt

Watch the Hedberg example

Entry:
“I bought a donut and they gave me a receipt for the donut.”

- **Information:** A purchase and paperwork.
- **Emotion:** Mild puzzlement.
- **Curiosity:** Why is this worth discussing?

- **Connection:** Routine transactions.
- **Picture:** A doughnut and a receipt.

His objection turns the ordinary event into a premise.

Discussion:
What ordinary procedure has more ceremony than the situation seems to warrant?

Writing prompt:
Find your own transaction with an unnecessary procedure. Develop a different underlying observation rather than substituting another item into Hedberg's joke.

4. Taylor Tomlinson: Being in Her Twenties

Watch the Tomlinson example

Entry excerpt:
"I'm sick of my twenties."

- **Information:** A life stage and an attitude.
- **Emotion:** Frustration.
- **Curiosity:** Why reject a period people idealize?
- **Connection:** Uncertainty, comparison, and expectations at any age.
- **Picture:** Initially abstract. Later examples supply it.

Discussion:
Which familiar belief is she challenging?

Writing prompt:
Choose something people call "the best." What about your experience complicates that description?

5. Brian Regan: Buying a Refrigerator

Watch the Regan example

Opening idea, paraphrased:
He needs a refrigerator and is inexperienced at buying one.

- **Information:** A purchase and a novice.
- **Emotion:** Uncertainty.
- **Curiosity:** What difficulty could this ordinary purchase create?
- **Connection:** Dealing with a salesperson while uninformed.
- **Picture:** A showroom with multiple models.

Discussion:
How does admitting inexperience put the audience on his side?

Writing prompt:
What were you expected to choose before you knew what mattered?

What These Examples Show

A comedian can enter a topic through:

- Recognition
- An event
- A procedure
- A feeling
- Inexperience

There is no single required opening formula. Sometimes the first sentence introduces the subject and the next supplies the compelling condition.

Sources That Prompt Your Own Brain

Choose 1-3 Ways to find Material Assign it a day during the week. On this Day you use this method to find material.

Outside material gives your mind something to respond to. The useful result may be a memory or observation that was already yours.

Read until something makes you react. Then look away and follow that reaction.

Prompting Diaries



Record one irritation, surprise, embarrassment, delight, or unanswered question each day.

Prompts:

- What happened today that I would tell a friend about?
- What did I pretend was fine?
- What reaction surprised me?

Books of Facts or a Fact App

Choose a fact that changes how you see an ordinary thing.

Prompts:

- Why didn't I know that?
- What does that make me wonder?
- Where does this collide with everyday behavior?

Record the source and verify the fact before presenting it as true.

Lists

Use lists of:

- 1001 Ways to Be Romantic
- 50 Questions to Ask on a First Date
- Fears
- Weird Family rules
- Rejected jobs / Job Interview Questions
- Top Topics Searched on the Internet
- 50 Items that are As Seen on TV https://www.asseenontvlive.com/products/

Write a Personality Profile or Bio

- Which two items don't seem to belong together?
- Which item reveals something about me?
- What pattern am I noticing?



Self-Help

Read a promise, rule, exercise, or chapter heading.

Prompts:

- Who could follow this advice easily?
- What happens when my family, boss, budget, or habits get involved?
- Where do two pieces of advice conflict?

Gossip Columns

Look for status, approval, image management, and rules applied unevenly.

Prompt:
What ordinary behavior is being treated as extraordinary because someone famous did it?

Treat unverified claims as rumors. The social pattern can prompt material without assuming an allegation is true.

SubReddits / AmITheAsshole

Great Chance to make fun of the dumb stuff people do in relationships and they think it's okay.

Current Events

Read enough of the story to understand what happened.

Prompts:

- Who is affected?
- What everyday experience makes the stakes understandable?
- What promise and result are in tension?
- Identify the Irony

Save the source, date, and essential context.



Watching Stand-Up

Pause at the topic entry.

Prompts:

- What made me want to hear more?
- What experience of my own did this awaken?
- Where do I have a different observation?

Study the mechanism. Develop your own situation, angle, and payoff.

Reading Quotes

Treat an assertion as something to test.

Prompts:

- When is this advice true?
- When is it impossible?
- Who says it but doesn't follow it?
- What happened when I tried it?

Verify the attribution if you name the speaker.

Reading Books

Fiction offers motives, dilemmas, relationships, and scenes. Nonfiction offers claims, facts, and systems.

Prompt:
Which behavior, rule, or choice reminds me of my own life?

Even a chapter heading can start an association.

More Prompts for Finding Topics

Choose three. Spend two minutes on each without trying to write a punchline.



Things I Noticed

- What did someone explain that became less clear as they explained it?
- What small task required an absurd amount of preparation?
- What was designed to help me but gave me more work?
- What routine do we perform without knowing why?
- What ordinary word becomes strange when I take it literally?
- What do people insist is optional while punishing you for declining?

Things I Reveal About Myself

- What do I secretly enjoy that conflicts with my image?
- What am I proud of that nobody else finds impressive?
- What purchase was supposed to turn me into a different person?
- What do I judge in strangers and excuse in myself?
- What did I confidently misunderstand?
- What am I too old to do, too young to do, or too tired to care about?

Things That Connect a Source to My Life

- What memory did that sentence bring back?
- Who in my life behaves like this character or institution?
- Where have I heard that excuse before?
- What would this advice look like at Thanksgiving, on a date, or at work?
- What does this fact make me wonder about something I already know?
- What is the smallest example of this large problem?

Things That Help a Topic Develop

- What is the stated purpose, and what actually happens?
- Who wants what, and what gets in the way?
- What is the reasonable expectation? What violates it?
- What would happen if everybody followed this rule literally?
- What does the opposite side believe, and where are they right?
- What detail changes the entire meaning of the situation?

Exercise 2: Use a Source to Find a Topic

Choose one source from the list above.

Spend five minutes with it, then close it.

Your goal is three original topic candidates—not three summaries.

Source title, description, page, or link:

The fact, passage, advice, list item, or behavior that prompted me:

My immediate reaction—and why:

A memory, observation, or situation from my own life it brings up:

Generate Three Candidates

For each, identify a specific condition and your attitude toward it.

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

Candidate 3:



Select and Write

Choose the candidate with the clearest condition and strongest personal response.

Write the opening as though speaking to an audience. Use one or two sentences.

The opening does not have to be a punchline.

Run It Through the Filter

- What happened?
- How do I feel?
- Why keep listening?
- Why would they care?
- What can they picture?

Revise the weakest answer.

Exercise 3: Turn a Headline Into Conversation

A news headline can prompt a topic, but your opening should sound like you're talking to people.

Read the article before rewriting its headline. Keep facts separate from your opinion, exaggeration, or imagined scene.

Demonstration

Fictional practice headline:
"Retailer Introduces Mandatory Account Registration for Discount Access."

Stiff opening:
"A retailer has introduced mandatory account registration for discount access."

Spoken opening:
“The store will give me a discount, but first I have to create an account.”

Opening with an angle:
“I went in to buy toothpaste. Before they’d give me the sale price, they wanted me to join their organization.”

The listener gets an understandable situation, a personal response, and a concrete purchase.

If you only read about the event, say something like:

“I read about a store…”

Don’t accidentally imply that you personally experienced something you only read about.

Your Turn

Source, date, and headline:

Essential facts in plain language:

My reaction:

A familiar human connection:

Version 1: Tell a friend what happened.

Version 2: Say it on stage with your attitude.

Read Aloud and Revise

- Does it sound like something you would say?
- Can listeners follow it without seeing the headline?
- Have you cut unnecessary article details?
- Have you preserved qualifications that affect the claim?
- Does the opening create a reason to hear the next sentence?

Exercise 4: Test and Refine the Opening

Start with your best premise from one of the previous exercises.

Write three entrances into the same idea. Changing the entrance shouldn't change the underlying facts.

NOTE: I'm just following the general instructions that Carlin uses when he talks about how the material goes from idea to premise to joke to routine. You don't have to use this specific process. You may have your own process that works.

A. Direct Information With a Feeling

Example:
"I'm trying to cancel a subscription, and the company won't let me talk to a person."

Your version:

B. A Concrete Scene

Example:
"I've been staring at a button that says 'We're sorry to see you go' for twenty minutes. It doesn't let me go."

Your version:

C. A Contradiction or Question

Example:
“Why is signing up one click, but canceling requires a relationship?”

Your version:

Read Without Explaining

Read each version aloud.

Your listener reports:

1. The situation they understood.
2. The feeling they heard.
3. The question they want answered.

Listen for what the words actually communicated.

Score the Five Checks

0: Missing
1: Implied or weak
2: Clear

Version	Information	Emotion	Curiosity	Connection	Picture

A					
B					
C					

Use the scores to identify a revision—not to predict whether the joke will get a laugh.

My revised opening:

The next beat that delivers on its promise:

Common Repairs

Too broad: Add a specific condition.

Too abstract: Add a scene.

Too much context: Keep the information the audience needs to understand the turn.

Forced outrage: Name the feeling you actually have.

Sensational but empty: Add a real dilemma or consequence.

Familiar subject with a borrowed observation: Return to your own experience.

An opening that promises one thing while the bit discusses another: Decide which promise you want to make.

A Seven-Day Topic-Finding Routine

Spend ten minutes a day.

Minutes 1–3: Read or review one prompt source.

Minutes 4–6: Write three reactions or associations.

Minutes 7–9: Turn one into a specific premise and spoken opening.

Minute 10: Say it aloud. Record the source and your revision.

Day	Source
1	Diary or memory
2	List of purchases or habits
3	Self-help advice or a quote
4	Fact book or nonfiction passage
5	News story or gossip pattern
6	A stand-up topic that prompts a different personal experience

7	Review the week and refine your three most promising openings

Keep a Topic Notebook

For each idea, record:

- Source
- Raw idea
- Reaction
- Personal association
- Subject
- Specific condition
- Angle
- Opening
- Unanswered question
- Next beat
- Factual check, if needed

Save rejected ideas, too. A topic that goes nowhere today may connect with something next week.

You don’t have to wait for a funny thought. Give your brain something to react to. Notice the reaction. Find the condition. Then talk to us.

Compare and contrast makes friction visible. Put two expectations, beliefs, or behaviors beside each other, then investigate the gap.

Your relationship examples also introduce self-implication: we can believe we love someone while expecting them to become the person we've imagined.

Finding Friction Through Compare and Contrast

Compare what someone says with what they do. Compare what you expected with what happened. Or compare what you want for another person with what they want for themselves.

The gap gives you something to investigate.

Compare This	With This	The Friction
Who my girlfriend is	Who I want her to become	Affection collides with expectations.
Who my kids are	Who I imagined they would become	Their independence collides with my plans.
My ideals for someone	Their desires for themselves	Whose vision gets to determine their life?
What a religious teaching says	How someone practicing it behaves	A stated principle collides with an action.
Someone's demand for acceptance	Their willingness to accept others	Acceptance becomes a one-way expectation.
My belief that people should be themselves	My reaction when they disappoint me	My own values collide with my behavior.

Look for the Hidden Demand

Sometimes what sounds like advice contains an expectation:

"I want what's best for you."

That raises a useful question:

Best according to whom?

A parent may want security while the child wants adventure. A partner may want change while the other person wants acceptance. Neither has to be a villain for the situation to contain friction.

Other situations involve a sharper contradiction: someone demands the freedom to follow their beliefs while denying that freedom to others.

Be specific about the behavior you're examining. A particular statement or incident gives you more material than a sweeping accusation.

Original Opening Examples

"I tell my kids they can become anything they want. Then they tell me what they want, and I start suggesting alternatives."

"I want my girlfriend to feel completely comfortable being herself. I do have a few edits."

"My friend says everyone should be free to practice their beliefs. Apparently that freedom expires when you practice different ones."

These openings establish the two sides efficiently. The next beat can show the conversation, rule, or incident that exposes the gap.

✍️ Exercise: Put the Two Sides Together

What I—or someone else—claim to believe:

What happens when that belief is tested:

What the other person actually wants:

Where the expectations collide:

My opening, written as stage conversation:

Then ask: Am I exposing their contradiction, my contradiction, or both?

Example: I do this bit about religion. It culminates when I say, “Everything they do in religion is to get their downline to contribute more money, more money, more money. To keep their downline coming back to the church to get more money. “If you take the money out of religion, it doesn’t exist, it goes away.

“That’s why religion has two I’s and no U.”

It can work as a tag after a specific example of someone making their beliefs the standard everyone else must follow. The example earns the point; the spelling gives it a compact finish.

Resources

These are some of the sources I use every day when writing new material.

NOTE: Don’t just collect something interesting. Identify the expectation, contradiction, or behavior that gives you something to write about.”

Advice columns are especially useful for joke writing: people explain what they want, then reveal the behavior keeping them from getting it. That gives you conflict, rationalization, hypocrisy, and competing points of view.

Advice columns — Category 3

Source	What to mine for jokes
Dear Abby	Family obligations, marriage, jealousy, and “Am I being unreasonable?” situations.
Miss Manners	The friction between polite behavior and what people actually want to say.
Ask a Manager	Workplace power, ridiculous bosses, office etiquette, and corporate logic.
Carolyn Hax	Relationships, boundaries, and conflicting expectations.
Ask Natalie	Dating, marriage, secrets, and mismatched intentions.

UExpress also has a Life Advice directory, so you can browse several columns together. Some publications restrict access. uexpress.com

Facts, curiosities & unexpected knowledge — Categories 1 and 10

Source	What to mine for jokes
Now I Know	A weekday newsletter built around an unusual fact and its story. Good for “Wait—why?” premises.
Atlas Obscura	Strange places, obscure customs, unusual foods, and human obsessions.
JSTOR Daily	Research-backed stories about history, culture, and everyday assumptions.
Smithsonian Magazine	Science, inventions, animals, history, and unexpected discoveries.
Guinness World Records	Extremes of human achievement—and the question, “Who decided this needed a record?”

These give you factual starting points for incongruity, analogies, and social critique. JSTOR Daily links to the scholarship behind its articles; Now I Know currently directs readers to its newsletter platform for recent issues while renovating its older archive. nowiknow.com

Comic-strip aggregation — Category 7

Source	What to study
GoComics	A broad collection of strips and panels: setup efficiency, character perspective, and the final turn.
Comics Kingdom	Daily and vintage strips: recurring characters, dialogue, and visual punchlines.
ArcaMax Comics	Another large browsing collection for comparing how different cartoonists handle everyday subjects.
GoComics Political Cartoons	Visual analogies, symbolism, exaggeration, and political contradictions.

For a structure workout, **cover the last panel, write three possible endings, then reveal the cartoonist's ending.** gocomics.com

Political satire & social satire — Categories 2, 6 and 7

Source	What to study
The Onion	Headline construction, institutional absurdity, and reporting ridiculous behavior in a serious voice.
McSweeney's Internet Tendency	Comic lists, monologues, parody, and sustained points of view. Its politics collection narrows the search.
NewsThump	British spoof news and satire—useful for seeing familiar conflicts through another culture.

The Beaverton	Canadian satire offering another angle on politics and social behavior.

Get personal 1 on 1 Coaching with Jerry just follow this link to learn more!

