How to Write Comedy Like Rita Rudner



How do you define Comedy Success?

- ☐ A Comedy Special?
- ☐ A Film Career
- ☐ A Sitcom Starring You?
- ☐ Longevity and Staying Power (Working till you want to retire?)

Who?

Rita Rudner is a woman of a certain age and she's thriving in comedy.

As a comedian, there is so much to learn from a comedian like Rita Rudner.

M.A.P: MATERIAL - AUDIENCE - PERFORMER

Don't Try to be Everybody's Comedian

Rita, is like the Larry the Cable Guy of Comedy. She has identified her niche.

Who is Your Customer?

In business one of the keys to success is understanding your customer. Who is your customer?

- Is it kids?
- Is it adults?
- Is it adult liberals/conservatives?
- Is it hard working blue collar families?
- Is it Gen Z, Gen X?
- Is it male dominant?
- Is it feminist? ETC.

Segues

States a theme

Of course, then states the theme

Hooks

Relatability

Theme

Set Mapping

- Rita Rudner maps her sets by theme.
- Economy (2:00)
- Being a Mom
    - Trying to get pregnant
    - Surrogacy
    - Adoption
    - Having the baby
        - Concerns, dilemmas, embarrassments
    - Getting older
- Things are changing (when you get older)

Community

Banks lent money to people who couldn't pay it back. Correct?

Shouldn't they have asked us first?

Joke

Compare and Contrast joke to take us to funny from sad.

What till you hear this question

Steal your identity - If they want to be me...

I don't know if you know this but I'm a mommy now...

What ya gonna do?

Why do you have to take the eggs out? (She does a take)

And then we were outside. (PAUSE… then audience laughs)

9:14

Joke Parsing, Set Building

“Of Course I have too many credit cards. I lost one I didn't even notice. I noticed when I got that bill. Oh, it was so much less. I'm letting him keep it. I'm saving money. And of course now they not only steal your credit card, they steal your identity. I think if they steal your identity, they should have to visit your parents.”

This premise has more. Rita Cut the extra jokes out to fit it into the set.

In this bit can you see the possible incongruity joke play you can do with that last line?

If they steal your identity….

YOUR CHORES	

Take out the garbage	
Sleep with your wife	
Pay your bills	
Wash your car	
Do your laundry	
Raise Your kids	
Go to the kids' recitals	
Take your kid to play dates	
Take your wife / husband shopping	
Buy your wife Valentine's cards	
Buy your wife Flowers	
Have dinner with your in-laws	
Shave your legs	
Pay Your Taxes	
Have your kids over for Christmas	
Go on vacation with your parents	
Eat Dinner with your wife	
Mow your lawn	

Why Would You Want to Learn to Write Like Rita Rudner

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Main Structures

Reverse

3-Way Build Up

Compare & Contrast

Joke Quotes

We did long for the pitter-patter of little feet, so we decided to buy a dog. Cheaper, and… get more feet

I love being married, I do. It's so great to find that one special person that you want to annoy for the rest of your life.

Well, the old theory was "marry an older man because they're more mature". But the new theory is "men don't mature — marry a young one".

How to Write Great Set-ups

In show business, they say your entrance is the most important moment. The audience decides in the first few seconds if they like you. In real life a woman decides in the first 8 seconds if she'll kiss a man. In comedy the audience decides during the setup, if they're interested in your joke.

> *"Ninety-eight percent of the population must bear the responsibility of the 2 percent of the population who continue this downward spiral of complete incompetence. After all, we voted them into office."*

Most beginning comedians want the laugh so badly that they rush to get to the punchline. The huge majority of comedians do not give as much attention to the set up as they do the punchline. This could spell death for most jokes. This may come as a surprise, but jokes are not about the punchline, they're about the story leading up to the punchline.

In fact, you don't want the audience to think you're telling a joke necessarily. You want them to think you're giving them something interesting, compelling, transformational. Something that will fulfill them. They want to be part of something. Part of a community, part of a group event, and they're usually thrilled to be part of the story.

Audiences are selfish. They are there at the show for one reason: they want to be fulfilled. They want something from this experience. They want to laugh, be touched, experience something memorable and meaningful.

They want to see the colors, smell the smells, feel the textures of your story. They want to reminisce, feel, be shocked, and fooled. But they don't want to be made fools of.

This course is mostly about setups for comedians for stand-up:

There are subtle differences between writing for a stand-up comedy act and writing for late-night T.V. This course is about writing for your stand-up act.

If during the class you have any questions… just ask. I will do my best to address them.

Let's watch some comedians!

Important thing to consider when watching comedians work:

1. Transcribe the material.
2. Watch one joke at a time.
3. Analyze the set-ups

Jerry Seinfeld:

Let's watch Jerry Seinfeld open his show for "I'm Telling You for the Last Time"
https://youtu.be/ppR78fk1gHc

Opening Joke: Write Your opening Joke.
What are the conditions of the opening joke?

Jim Gaffigan:

One thing I really like about Jim Gaffigan is he seems to be able to take anything and everything and make it funny. https://youtu.be/I-JT7BQB3DM?t=346

I was invited to a surprise birthday party.
It was a surprise birthday party for a dog.

Brian Kiley:

Brian is a joke-writing master. Listen to how he gets into the joke and the meticulousness of the joke. Brian is a terrific comedian to study for beginning comedians to learn joke writing or for experienced comedians to review and reconnect to their fundamentals. https://vimeo.com/360634638

Hannah Gadsby:

Hannah Gadsby is one of my favorite comedians. She's raw. Honest. Flawed. A great joke writer and an even better storyteller.
https://youtu.be/yNKOI-75E7A

Most Jokes Contain 3 Primary Elements:

1. Topic (Subject)
2. Angle
3. Punchline

A Good Topic:

1. Is not about the truth. It's about plausibility. Should be plausible.
2. A good topic is not necessarily funny. It's informative.
3. Creates a clear image / "movie" in the audience's mind.
4. Short is good but not too short that it cuts out the information.
5. Capture's interest
6. The audience can relate to it
7. Get them to have an emotion about the setup.

More attention has to be paid to the setup of a joke; it bears most of the information.

Let's look at 10 Old Jokes and really study the setup.

"You're only as young as you feel. When I get up in the morning, I don't feel anything until noon. By then it's time for my nap."

"I go for a swim every single day. It's either that or buy a new golf ball."

"I think travel is very educational. I can now say 'Kaopectate' in seven different languages."

'When I was a kid I slept in one bed with six brothers. We had one bed-wetter. It took us two years to find out who it was."

"I like politicians who pray a lot. It keeps their hands up where we can see them.

"I have the perfect simplified tax form for our government. Why don't they just print our money with a return address on it?"

"I had a flight attendant on the last flight who was so old after she demonstrated the oxygen mask she left it on."

"We've had a lot of mudslides in California lately. I was driving to work the other day, glanced out the window, and my house was making better time than I was."

“I’m thrilled to be here in New York a city that always changing always on the move. There are some things that never change that are always there for you; the cabbies and the B.O.”

Where do the setups come from?

Setups come from what antagonized you about this idea, this word, this situation? What made you:

1. Curious
2. Confused
3. Freaked out
4. Annoyed
5. Angry
6. Intrigued
7. Excited
8. Emotional
9. Current Situations in your life
10. Facts about your life
11. Obstacles in Life

Necessary Elements in a Setup:

Just talk to us.
Let us in on the game of the scene. What’s happening. Why do we trust you?

- **Every joke is a story. If that's true, every joke should contain the elements of story.**
- Character
- Theme
- Setting
- Plot
- Conflict

- **Find the Topic:**
- A good topic has truth
- Hook them:
- Pique their curiosity
- Shock or surprise them
- Threaten their well-being, health, wealth, safety, food supply,
- Show them how not to be fooled
- Introduce a curious fact, a fear, a flaw, something embarrassing.
- Tweak their emotion:
- Make them root for you to win
- Give them a clear image, (especially if that image will be shattered)
- Introduce a dilemma imposed on you by an outside force.
- Offer transformational advice.
- Give the audience instructions
- Give them a reason to celebrate
- Introduce a paradox: The most loveless thing I ever did in my life is get married.
- Don't get me wrong I was in love. She was great she liked the stuff I liked. She liked to talk about politics with me. But then I discovered that she was faking all of that. She actually hated discussing politics but wanted to trick me. You know how I know this? She told me. 15 years into the marriage. You know what else she pretended to like? Sex.

- Hit them with something relatable and recognizable.
- “Let’s talk about suicide.”
- Something that concerns them, worries them, makes them feel superior.

Unique Setups:

- Pranks
- Quick Announcement
- Joke Setup in the Intro
- Act-out Setup
- A dilemma about you
- Shocking

How to Practice Writing Your Setups:

1. Copy or Transcribe 25 of your favorite jokes.
2. Study the setup.
    a. What’s in the setup?
    b. What do you think inspired the joke?
        i. The news?
        ii. Current events
        iii. A sporting event
        iv. The weather (condition)
        v. Personal experience
        vi. A traumatic event
        vii. A challenging event

    c. What are the elements?
    d. What’s the emotion?
    e. Do you see the pictures?

3. Identify the necessary elements in the setup that are used to get to the punchline. What word or words are there to make that punchline work.
4. Take your own idea, word, situation, and craft your own setup by asking yourself:
    a. What do I want to say with this joke?
    b. What is my angle?
    c. What do I want my audience to know about how I feel about the joke?

Additional Notes:

Think of a set up like the introduction to a new piece of information that you want to share with the audience. It is designed to provide information. Draw their curiosity, make them feel like they need to know more. Setups are unique to openings of sets. Setups are the beginnings of each joke or bit. Setups get the ball rolling. Whether you're storytelling or telling individual jokes your setups for each joke or bit can usually determine whether or not the joke will be good.

Learn to spend some time on your set ups.

In this course we're covering the fundamentals of a good setup. There are all kinds of ways you can get super creative with your setups, but for this class we'll focus on the fundamentals.

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 it's 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.
    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 got all the best fireworks. When I was 12-years-old we called him "3-fingered Petey."

Teach Them

Every joke is a story. If that’s true, every joke should contain the elements of story.
Character
Theme
Setting
Plot
Conflict

Find the Topic:
A good topic has truth

Hook them:

Peak their curiosity
Shock or surprise them
Introduce a fact that might threaten their well-being, health, wealth, safety, food supply,
Show them how not to be fooled
Introduce a curious fact, a fear, a flaw something embarrassing.
Tweak their emotion:
Make them root for you to win
Introduce a dilemma imposed on you by an outside force.
Offer transformational advice.
Give the audience instructions
Give them a reason to celebrate
Introduce a paradox: The most loveless thing I ever did in my life is get married. Don't get me wrong I was in love. She was great she liked the stuff I liked. She liked to talk about politics with me. But then I discovered that she was faking all of that. She actually hated discussing politics but wanted to trick me. You know how I know this? She told me. 15 years into the marriage. You know what else she pretended to like? Sex.
Hit them with something relatable and recognizable.
"Let's talk about suicide."
Something that concerns them, worries them, makes them feel superior.

My parents told me I'd never amount to anything.
I remember when I told my father I wanted to do comedy. He looked me right in the eye and said "You really think you're going to make a living doing comedy?" And I looked him right in the eye and said, "Define 'living.'"
I've been doing comedy for over 30 years, either writing or performing. I've put 2 of my kids through college, two are still in school. One of my kids just graduated law school. My H.S. Guidance Counselor once said to me, "Jerry, you can't joke your way through life."
Turns out you can.

Introduce an Emotion or Dilemma

It's always a thrill to be back in New York City...
I'm afraid to get married…

My new wife and I have been experiencing some difficulties. Not your normal difficulties. You see, my name is Jerry. My wife's name is Jeri.
I remember when I told my father I wanted to do comedy. He looked me right in the eye and said "You really think you're going to make a living doing comedy?
My father, who lives in Bakersfield, was just diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer.

Introduce an Incongruity

Any song sounds better as heavy metal
Stuff changes when you get older
This economy. I can't believe this economy. The bad news is the banks have failed and nobody has any money. The good news is: Everything is on sale.

Make it Sound Like You're Going to Say Something Shocking

I live in a Mexican neighborhood. I live in California.
The illegal immigrants we really have to be concerned with…
Kids are good for one thing…

Announce an Accomplishment

Just sold the house I lived in
Six months sober... (applause) I'm just kidding, but if I said I've been drinking since I was eighteen and I don't punch my wife, none of you would've applauded.
My wife and I just had a baby... (applause)... no big deal, I just fucked my wife.

Introduce an Interesting Fact

The average life span of a taste bud is 10 days…
I have five kids
I come from a large family
I'm Irish and Native American.
Don't let my words fool you…
Don't let my looks fool you…

Quick announcement:
Before I get started…

I want to be rich. Some people are so rich they don't care about humanity…

Your setup should be flexible:
When writing your set up be aware of what your situation is. Where does the joke fall into the situation you are in currently on stage. What point are you in in your show?

I'm in a crazy mood today. It must be the energy from this crowd, the adrenaline… either that or the Adderall. Anybody taking this stuff.

"It's always a thrill being in New York city. It's always moving always changing, but there's something things that you can always depend on are always there for you like the cabbies and the B.O." --Seinfeld

- Introduce a dilemma imposed on you by an outside force.
    - I saw a sign that said, "Let's talk about suicide."

It has to captivate. A setup line doesn't do anything if it doesn't grab the attention of the listener.

- **Creates a hook**
    - "We refer to distance, in time..." (huh? what do you mean?)
- **Contains Emotion**
    - "I'm afraid to get married man."
- **How does it make you feel?**
- **Peaks your curiosity. New Information**
    - Some women are involved in what I like to call "selective negative focus." (the audience can't resist wanting to learn what that is)
- **Candid - surprising confession, pure honesty, vulnerability**
    - I do comedy a little bit different than most people... (How?) I like to take the stuff in my life that I would never tell anybody and I tell everybody. (the audience can't resist wanting to learn what that is).
- **Gets the audience to immediate see the picture. You want the audience to start running their movie of the scene you are creating for them.**

- *"The other day I was sending my daughter off to school. It was chilly outside and I said to my daughter, "Are you warm enough? Do you need a jacket?" Then I realized that I had become my parents. When does that change occur? There's no bell, no alarm."*

You definitely need a premise. A subject and a condition.
Character, theme setting, plot, conflict

Start with a subject.
Person
Place
Thing
Event
Situation
Inconsistencies

Always remember that all jokes are stories so they must also offer at least most elements from the maxim of the 5 W's

- Who
- What
- Where
- Why
- When
- How

1. Idea
    1. Inconsistencies
    2. Paradox
    3. Irony
    4. Hypocrisy
    5. Weird
    6. Ridiculous
    7. Stupid

        8. Crazy
        9. Confusing
        10. Embarrassing
2. Premise
3. Word
4. Emotion
5. Situation
6. Story
7. Fact
8. Quote
9. Observation
    1. Kept seeing all these billboards and bus bench signs that say, “Let’s talk about suicide.”

Remember: When you write a joke, sometimes you write it when it's by itself, all alone, but when you're performing your joke it's often a part of a larger presentation, so the joke has to be flexible. The setup should be flexible to fit the situation, the transition, maybe it ties into something that was said, maybe it follows another joke.