



"Other comedians tell Jokes, Paul Mooney tells the truth"

-- Dave Chappelle

How to Write Like Dave Chappelle



BIOGRAPHY



Born on August 24, 1973, in Washington, D.C. **Chappelle's parents were both professors:** His father, William, taught at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and his mother, Yvonne, worked as a professor at Howard University and then the University of Maryland, while also serving as a Unitarian minister. Chappelle's parents separated when Dave was 6 years old, and he subsequently began splitting time between his parents' homes in Washington and Ohio.

I like biographies. You can learn a lot about someone. Their biographies can reveal secrets.
Quick take-aways from Dave Chappelle's Biography:



- **Both his parents were professors**
- **His mother was also a Unitarian Minister**
- **Mother at Prestigious Howard University**
- **Father at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, OH**
- **His parents separated when he was 6**
- **He spent time at both homes; D.C and Ohio**

One reason I think it is important to note Chappelle's background is that based on the hours and hours I put in watching him, I am almost certain that he spent some time in classrooms watching one or both of his parents during their academic lectures, because he is so good at conveying information.

When Chappelle speaks he doesn't only do jokes or bits, he delivers his material as though he is giving a lecture and adds comedic structure all throughout his pieces. We will explore the techniques and structures he uses in this course.

Chappelle Started Comedy at 14

As a high school student at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C., Chappelle began a stand-up career. Because he was underage, his mother often had to accompany him to clubs as a legal guardian. Even at an early age, Chappelle's brand of humor was controversial, leading to frequent heckling—he was even booed offstage during amateur night at New York's famous Apollo Theatre.

Dave Chappelle decided to forgo college to start a stand-up career in New York City. By the early 1990s, he had begun earning accolades for his work in comedy. He made his film debut in [Mel Brooks'](#) Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993) and became the youngest comedian to be featured on the HBO special Comic Relief VI (1994).

Being True to Yourself

“The hardest thing to do is to be true to yourself especially when everybody is watching”

— Dave Chappelle



Connection or Jokes?

One of the oldest arguments in comedy is *What's more important, connection with your audience or great jokes?*

Chappelle does both.

One of the earliest traits of human evolution and the reason we have survived as a species for 300,000 years is through the use of gossip and storytelling with the intent to share information so as to evolve and survive.

This is important information because it's how you develop a connection and make the audience root for you.

Chappelle starts with compelling information and questions and answers the reason why? Then adds voice, act-outs, call backs, word play and an acute willingness to play like he's in a living room laughing and joking with friends.

Chappelle reads, watches documentaries, then shares what he learned with an audience along with his own interpretation, angle and interpretation.

His stories contain structure, irony, surprise, paradox, incongruities, simple truths and coincidences that we've had similar experiences.

Chappelle's Writing Process (the way I see it):

1. Take an illuminating topic. Filled with facts and ideas that make us think, give us a fresh look and teach us something new, something we should know.
2. Look for the inconsistencies in the history of how it has been propagandized in popular culture and go deeper into the truth all while using a common informal colloquial language. Like a professor in a small college, or at Howard University who are not afraid to speak their mind.



3. Then put it through a comedic filter of simple truth, cynicism, paradoxical wordplay, incongruous wordplay, double-entendre.
4. Heighten and sometimes wildly exaggerate.
5. Laugh through the ridiculousness to remind us to laugh.

New Information is Compelling

One of the things I want you to really consider in your comedy is the philosophy that human beings thrive on new information. We focus. We zero in on facts and historical data that illuminates us. We also like new tid-bits of information that we can easily consume

Chappelle's Comedy Structure

One of Chappelle's go-to comedy structures is Simple Truth. He'll make a statement about something then restate it in almost a mocking way (sometimes with an angle of self-deprecation).

"My first comedy influence was Bugs Bunny..."

<https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/jCFMhrmKUV8>

*You know who was a big influence on me that is really weird is Bugs Bunny,
That's just weird.
If you watch a lot of the stuff I do, you can almost see the influence in it,
Because these animators would animate these performances that were off the hook,
And the guy that, the guy that did the voices was Mel Blanc.
This guy was like some kind of savant or genius or something,
But they had some kind of real big comedic influence on me, like I liked those cartoons,
I think that was my first real big comedy influence, a rabbit.*

You could almost hear how Chappelle might perform this piece. He gives real information about himself, not intending to be funny, then comments on it in a simple truth way. *To think my first comedy influence was a fuckin' cartoon rabbit.*



Comic Relief VI - 1994

▶ Dave Chappelle - Comic Relief VI

One of Chappelle's key pieces of comedy was that black people are never taken as hostages because they make bad bargaining chips.

TRANSCRIPT:



Thank you. Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here tonight ladies and gentlemen. I'm not just saying that so you clap for me. I just got back from England. I had a hard time fitting in you know, so I tried to make myself feel comfortable hanging out in the black community you know, but both of those brothers were having a hard time fitting in too. All three of us were roughin' it together.

If you ever been to England, if you go through airport security, they're real tense. Everyone was really nervous because of terrorist attacks. Everybody except for me. You know why I wasn't scared? Because terrorists have never taken black hostages. And do you know why they have never taken black hostages? Because we are bad bargaining chips.

A.O.: They would call up the White House "Hello. We have got five black people and we will kill-- Hello"

Could you imagine what kind of world it would be if people just sit whenever they wanted to racially? Me like you'd be walking down the street and a black guy coming to you Hello your white devil your rapist of Africa Why hello my big lips pure chucking friend excuse me one second I'm getting kind of thirsty. I think I'll go to the Korean store and get some of the drink Hello he is slanted at ruining the academy neighborhood open the stores and taking the money out the community Jake Why hello? browse around but never buy anything suspicious looking

They really go crazy with those with those little racial stereotypes. I think this is probably one of the craziest stereotypes any you will ever hear and this is true. When I was little, I honestly used to believe that all white people were happy just to be white. I thought you guys stood around: (A.O.) "Fuckin' eh, am white! I'm king of the hill. top of the heap. A-Number One... Taxi! Just checking! You guys have been a fantastic audience.

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Joke Deconstruction:

Thank you. Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here tonight ladies and gentlemen. I'm not just saying that so you clap for me. (Personal. Establishing Community. Just talking to them. *I'm happy to be here with you, REALLY.*)"

STRUCTURE: Reverse

ANGLE: There's not a lot of black people in England. They're uncomfortable too.

Once Chappelle has the concept. He puts the premise in the form of a joke and tells it as a story.

STORY STRUCTURE: Fish out of water. Makes the listener root for him.

I just got back from England. I had a hard time fitting in you know, (FISH OUT OF WATER)so I tried to make myself feel comfortable hanging out in the black community you know, but both of those brothers were having a hard time fitting in too.

As a joke it would be like, "I just got back from England. I had a hard time fitting in you know, so I tried to make myself feel comfortable hanging out in the black community you know, with both of those brothers.

TAG: But both of those brothers were having a hard time too.

TAG: All three of us were roughin' it together.

JOKE #2: If you ever been to England, if you go through airport security, they're real tense. Everyone was really nervous because of terrorist attacks.

[CREATES TENSION]



Everybody except for me.

You know why I wasn't scared?

[HEIGHTENS TENSION & CREATES A HOOK WITH A QUESTION]

Because terrorists have never taken black hostages.

[OBSERVATION/SIMPLE TRUTH]

And do you know why they have never taken black hostages?
Because we make bad bargaining chips.

A.O.: They would call up the White House "Hello. We have got five black people and we will kill-- Hello"

[ACT-OUT/INCONGRUITY/COINCIDENCE]

JOKE #3:

Could you imagine what kind of world it would be if people just said whatever they wanted to racially?

[LITERARY DEVICE]: _____

Be like you'd be walking down the street and a black guy coming to you

A.O.:

BLACK MAN: Hello you white devil. You rapist of Africa.

WHITE MAN: Why hello my big-lipped, spear-chucking friend.

BLACK MAN: Excuse me one second I'm getting kind of thirsty. I think I'll go to the Korean store and get something to drink
Hello you slanted-eyed-ruining-the-economy-neighborhood-opening-stores-and-taking-the-money-out-the-community-Chink.

[BIG PAUSE TO CREATE TENSION WHILE ALLOWING THE AUDIENCE TO
CREATE THEIR OWN EXPECTATION]

KOREAN STORE OWNER: Why hello? browse around but never buy anything suspicious looking *Nigga!*



JOKE #4:

They really go crazy with those with those little racial stereotypes. I think this is probably one of the craziest stereotypes any of you will ever hear and this is true. When I was little, I honestly used to believe that all white people were happy just to be white. I thought you guys stood around: (A.O.) "Fuckin' eh, I am white! I'm king of the hill. top of the heap. A-Number One... Taxi! Just checking! You guys have been a fantastic audience.

Crowd Work

<https://youtu.be/KQTEarr4P4k>

Chappelle's crowd work is excellent.

One key reason: He listens to what the people in the crowd are saying. And responds authentically.

Even when it doesn't go the way he wants it to, he keeps the show at the level of comedy.

Dave Chappelle - Mountain View Amphitheater Sept. 20 2015

<https://youtu.be/O-sMbOs2Flw>

Chappelle's Use of the N-word?

Chappelle's use of the N-Word is another form of him using a storytelling device to create community with the audience. As outrageous as that may sound he uses the N-word as a conversation and an expression. It's an expression he might use with his close friends at a party just talking about some crazy shit that just happened.

Think about it. If Chappelle was sitting down with network chiefs about a series that they are going to pay him 100 million dollars for, he probably wouldn't be tossing around that word,



because it is a business setting and he doesn't want to speak intimately with these network chiefs. He wants to keep them at an arm's length so that he can address business.

But with an audience he wants to create a level of intimacy and his use of the N-word helps him to create that.

Summary

- Chappelle uses story and literary devices to compel the audience to listen.
 - Creates and Releases Tension
 - Uses hooks, like questions to create anticipation
 - Uses a “Save the Cat” approach by presenting a dilemma like the “Fish out of Water” device when he tells the story that he was recently in England.
- Chappelle establishes community with the audience, by *really* talking to them.
- Chappelle uses his in-the-moment style.
 - How does he accomplish this?
 - Fearless & Honest Emotion.
 - Heightens his inflections, (possibly to help him convey emotion)
- Chappelle's uses comedy structure his main go-to structures are:
 - Simple Truth
 - Where he says something one way then redefines it in it's explicit truth; ie: when he said his comedy was influenced by Bugs Bunny. Then clarified it with the simple truth of “*My comedy was inspired by a rabbit.*”
 - He also uses simple truth couched within an act-out and let's the act-out lend clarity to his statement.
 - Act-Outs: Much of Chappelle's jokes are achieved through act-outs.
 - Reverses
 - Irony
 - Benign Retaliation
 - Callbacks

Grab the Playbook exercises here.