“Create for the Joy, Not for the Clout”
“Loading my jokes up to YouTube gives my girlfriend a break, at least, of me talking ALL-OF-THE-TIME”
-- Josh Johnson

How to Write Comedy Like Josh Johnson



Writing Comedy Like Josh Johnson: Technique, Structure & Voice

Developing your skill by learning how Josh Johnson builds bits.

Course Overview & Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, students will be able to:

1. Recognize and apply the “configurational” technique (where the joke is left partly unresolved and the audience fills in the gap) that Josh Johnson uses.

2. Identify and experiment with two additional techniques characteristic of his style.

3. Write and perform short bits using each technique, then combine techniques into a mini-set.

4. Understand how Johnson’s background and persona influence his comedy—and map how students can adapt these ideas to their own writing voice.

Module A: Introduction – Josh Johnson’s Background & Comedic Persona

A1. Background Snapshot

In this video Josh Johnson walks through his approach to uploading his videos to YouTube. And his flow with his jokes. This is a can’t miss video interview with Mike Birbiglia. You’ve got to watch this. You’ll learn a lot.

Overthinking and not putting it out there is killing your momentum.

Josh Johnson built his career fast and this is one major reason why;

- **Josh Johnson | Reinventing The Modern Comedy Special | Mike Birbiglia's …**

- He studied lighting design for theatre at Centenary College of Louisiana before committing to stand-up. YouTube+1

- His mother worked as a special-education teacher then librarian; his father was a teacher. YouTube+1

- He began in stand-up in Chicago/New York, wrote for The Daily Show (as writer from 2017 and correspondent starting 2024) and for The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. YouTube

A2. How His Background Influences His Style

- His theatre-lighting design background suggests an awareness of stage/space/beat — which shows up in his pacing and the way he uses silence and pauses.

- Growing up in Louisiana and navigating different cultural/social intersections gives him an observational vantage — he often sees from a dual-perspective.

- The educator-parents background gives him a bit of the "explainer voice"—he often begins like he's teaching, then subverts it.

- His patience in letting jokes breathe and letting the audience fill in gaps aligns with his confidence in his material.

✍️Exercise:

How might your own background (education, upbringing, job, family, etc.) inform your comedic voice? Encourage them to identify the unique vantage point they bring — the same way Johnson uses his.

Technique 1 – The “Configurational” Approach (Leaving the Joke Unfinished)

B1. Definition & Explanation

- This approach sets up a scenario where the comedian doesn’t deliver a full traditional punchline. Instead, the absurdity is built, a pause or shift happens, and the audience *fills in* the gap.

- In Johnson’s style: he describes something real but odd, leads with credible logic, then stops at “what?!” or just gestures toward the absurdity, letting the audience laugh because they too are baffled.

- The comedy happens *between* the words, in the space left open.

B2. Video Clip



(Link: **Josh Johnson Had to Prove He Was Black to a Blind Man**

B3. Breakdown Questions

- What was the baseline scenario he sets up?
- At what point does he shift into disbelief or a pause?
- Where is the “gap” that the audience is invited to fill?
- How does his body language/pausing/voice tone support that moment?
- What assumptions does he exploit?

B4. Exercise

Prompt: Choose a bizarre but credible statement or scenario (for example: “Someone told me they only shop in vending machines”).
Write a 1-2 minute bit where you:

- Build the scenario.
- Use logic to lead the audience there.
- Hit the absurdity.
- Then *stop short* of the traditional final punchline — let the gap breathe.
  Performance/read-aloud: Note where you pause, where you let the audience think.

Module C: Technique 2 – Escalation & Relatable Anchoring

C1. Definition & Explanation

- Johnson often starts with something deeply relatable (e.g., family life, smartphone habits, mundane job stuff) so the audience says “I know that.”

- Then he escalates the scenario into a heightened version of reality — the absurd follows the real. The laughter comes because we recognise ourselves *then* recognise the exaggeration.

- The progression: relatable base → escalation → absurd climax.

Johnson likes to take a very simple story, anchor it in a normal situation, that everybody can relate to which shows him as normal, then draws comparison to somebody of a perceived higher achievement.

Exercise

C2. Video Clip

(Link: YouTube – The Only Way To Survive A Recession) YouTube
Use this to illustrate escalation from normal economic anxiety to comedic absurd.

C3. Breakdown Questions

- What is the “normal” scenario he begins with?

- How does he push or escalate it?

- When does the turn to absurd happen?

- Is the escalation believable (i.e., grounded) before it tips?

- How does his persona make the audience comfortable with the escalation?

Prompt: Pick a human behaviour (e.g., buying gym equipment, using dating apps, home-repair attempts).
Write a bit where you:

- Start with the everyday.
- Escalate into absurd.
- Hit a moment of "too much" where the audience laughs at the height.
  Performance/read-aloud: Notice the pivot from relatable → absurd; ensure the base remains grounded.

✍️Exercise:

List 5 everyday tasks:

1. Doing your laundry
2. Taking out the garbage
3. Shopping for groceries
4. Making your bed. (Folding Fitted Sheets)
5. Shopping on Amazon

Like I do my own laundry. I do… I'm not very good at it, but I… Uh… get it done. I used to always wind up leaving a tissue or a receipt in the pocket of a pair of pants… and uh… ultimately, the laundry is covered in like weird snowflakes and I know what happened, even though I was sure I checked all the pockets… That hasn't happened for like 6 months and now I feel like I'm an expert at laundry. I mean I still don't feel like I hold a candle to a surgeon at career day, but… he's up there talking about restarting someone's heart and I'm like. "I haven't left a receipt in my jeans in the washer all year."

Take 10 minutes.

1. Find your story.
2. Write it.
3. Talk about the seemingly uninteresting details.
4. Compare it to someone else who has achieved something we perceive as really impressive.

Technique 3 – Persona + Misdirection + Micro-Tension

Definition & Explanation

- **Persona**: Johnson's voice is conversational, intelligent, slightly above but still in it. He positions himself as curious and somewhat incredulous.
- **Misdirection**: He sets up an expectation ("you think this will go one way") then pivots to something unexpected.
- **Micro-tension**: He uses short pauses, glances, subtle changes in tone. These little beats build tension, then release via laughter.
- These elements combine: persona gives credibility; misdirection gives surprise; micro-tension times the laugh.

Video Clip

Use this to highlight how he uses persona + misdirection + tension.
(Link: YouTube – Tariff Tantrum: America vs China & The World) YouTube

Breakdown Questions

- What is the persona he inhabits in the clip?
- Where is the misdirection (the shift from expected to unexpected)?
- Where are the pauses or micro-beats?
- Does the shift feel smooth? Does the audience anticipate?
- How could you map a similar persona/technique in your own writing?



✍️Exercise:

Prompt: Choose a topic (tech, culture, politics, family).
Write a bit where you:

- Adopt a clear persona (who you are on stage; which is most cases is just you the way you are with friends).
- Set up an “obvious” expectation.
- Redirect or surprise.
- Include a micro-pause/beat.
  Performance/read-aloud: Pay attention to your voice, your look/pause, where the audience is prepared for one thing then gets the other.

Synthesis – Crafting Your Mini-Set

Instructions

- Choose **two** of the techniques (Configurational, Escalation + Relatability, Persona + Misdirection + Micro-Tension) to **combine**.
- Write a 5-minute mini-set:
  1. Set-up: Pick a relatable base (topic).
  2. Use one technique to deliver a bit.
  3. Use the other technique for a second bit or linked bit.
  4. Perform or read to class.

Feedback Criteria:

- Clear relatable base?
- Technique used and recognisable?
- Audience gap (if configurational used)?
- Escalation believable before absurdity?
- Persona consistent and credible?
- Misdirection/beat/tension effective?
- Overall pacing/timing acceptable?

Applying to Personal Voice & Themes

Discussion: Making It Your Own

- Talk about how Johnson uses his vantage (Louisiana, theatre-lighting design, writer's room experience) and how your students (and you) have your own vantage (e.g., turning bad news into jokes, consumer-profit critique, etc.).
- Encourage students to map: *"What do I care about? What absurdities lie in that theme? What is my persona?"*

Assignment for home

- Write a one-page (3–4 minute) personal comedy piece using **one or more** of the techniques, rooted in each student's own theme/voice.



- Bring to next session for performance and critique.

Wrap-Up Checklist

Before finalizing any written or performance piece, ask:

- Is my base relatable?
- Do I escalate (if using escalation)?
- Am I leaving a gap (if using configurational)?
- Is my persona clear and consistent?
- Have I planned pauses/micro-tension?
- Does the piece reflect *my* voice, not just mimicking someone else?
- Did I rehearse timing and delivery (not just the writing)?

This class:

In this course you've learned how Josh Johnson combines a grounded voice with structural play—letting the audience fill gaps, escalating real scenarios into absurd ones, and using a strong persona with misdirection and micro-tension to land laughs. The value of including his background is to show that his voice isn't accidental: his upbringing, education, writer-room experience, and observational patience all contribute. Your job as the instructor (and the students' job as writers) is to *borrow* the technique, not the voice—and to adapt it to their own vantage and themes.

By practising each of the three techniques individually and then combining them into a mini-set, students will gain hands-on experience in the kind of layered structure Johnson uses so effectively. Anchor these techniques into the writer's persona and

personal theme to ensure the comedy remains authentic, grounded, and uniquely their own.

Having a roadmap makes this easier to do doesn't it?

Want to dive deeper?
Get personal 1 on 1 Coaching with Jerry just follow this link to learn more!

