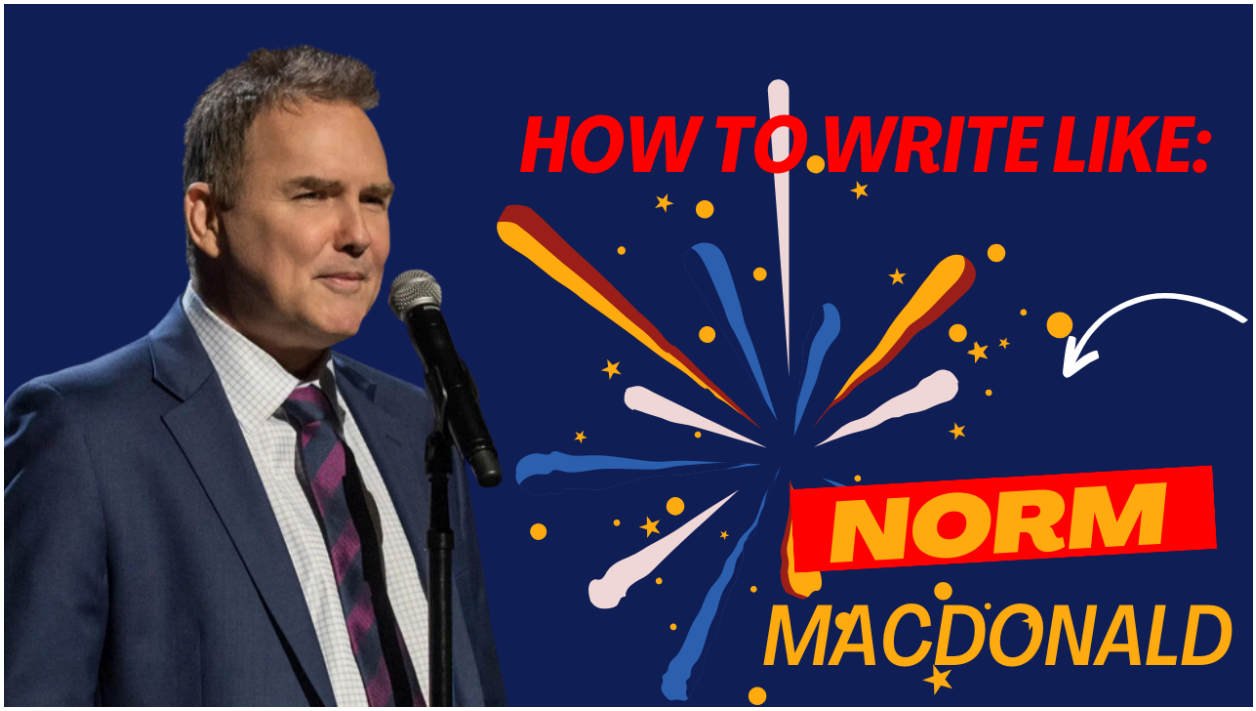
"*In math, you could get 100 percent. It was very fair. That's what I liked about math. You could figure it out, and the teacher couldn't have a stupid opinion about it…*"

How to Write Comedy Like Norm MacDonald



Background

Known for his wry, sarcastic point of view and quirky, irreverent observations, Norm MacDonald was born in 1959 and died at the age of 61.

Raised in Quebec City as the son of two teachers, Norm MacDonald has two brothers who are Canadian newscasters. MacDonald started his stand-up career in Ottawa before making his mark at the 1987 Just For Laughs Comedy Festival

in Montreal. He attributes the strength of Canada's stand-up scene to a lack of entertainment industry distractions.

MacDonald's career progressed as he wrote for "Roseanne", despite finding sitcoms less appealing. His stint at "Saturday Night Live" began in 1992, where he excelled at the Weekend Update segment and impersonated several notable figures, despite his preference for stand-up over sketch comedy. His tenure at SNL ended controversially in 1998, amidst rumors linking his departure to jokes about O.J. Simpson, a friend of NBC executive Don Ohlmeyer.

Following his departure from SNL, MacDonald's film "Dirty Work" (1998) struggled, partly due to NBC's refusal to advertise it, reflecting ongoing tensions with Ohlmeyer. MacDonald later found success with an ABC sitcom developed by Bruce Helford, his former boss, and released his first comedy album, "Ridiculous", in 2006.

Notable in his later career were his unique approach to the Comedy Central Roast of Bob Saget and his 2011 stand-up special "Me Doing Stand-Up". Comedy Central ranked him 83rd among the top 100 stand-up comedians.

Despite not having a super successful television career, late night TV loved Norm MacDonald.

David Letterman’s quote about Norm still stands out in my mind today. Letterman said, "If we could have, we would have had Norm on every damn week ... He is funny in a way that some people inhale and exhale ... The combination of the delivery and his appearance and his intelligence. There may be people as funny as Norm, but I don't know anybody who is funnier."

Read More:
https://www.grunge.com/606700/norm-macdonald-facts-fans-might-not-know/



Style:

In comedy, there are four unique pillars, when it comes to stand-up comedy the four pillars are as follows:

The four pillars of stand-up comedy, which are key to creating a successful routine, can be broadly categorized as follows:

1. **Content/Writing:** This is the foundation of any stand-up routine. It includes the jokes, stories, one-liners, and anecdotes that the comedian shares. Good content is original, relatable, and often reflects a unique perspective or insight into everyday situations or observations and the best jokes contain good structure.

2. **Persona/Stage Character:** This refers to the distinct identity or character a comedian presents on stage. It's how they portray themselves, which may be an exaggeration of their real personality or a completely different character. This persona influences the style of humor and the way the audience perceives the comedian.

3. **Delivery/Performance:** This encompasses the comedian's timing, voice modulation, body language, facial expressions, and overall stage presence. Good delivery can significantly enhance the humor in the content, making even simple jokes more effective.

4. **Audience Engagement:** This involves the comedian's ability to connect with the audience, read the room, and adjust their performance accordingly. It includes dealing with hecklers, managing varying audience reactions, and creating a rapport with the audience, making the comedy experience more interactive and personal.

These pillars are interdependent and collectively contribute to the effectiveness and appeal of a stand-up comedy performance. Mastery in each of these areas is often what sets apart great comedians from the rest.

With Norm MacDonald his character, timing and persona were literally the linchpin of what made up his overall show. Without that pillar, he would just be an average or underwhelming comedian.

It was because of this trait that he made such an impact on the audience.

He developed a character that was smug, sarcastic, mischievous, but incredibly unassuming. His character reminded me of Bob Newhart and the character Columbo who was a detective who appeared forgetful and that threw off the people he might've been questioning. The Bob Newhart character had a bit of a stammer too, making the audience root for him just to finish a sentence.

Norm MacDonald's character wasn't as obvious as those others but that stumbling behavior is definitely present without the character seeming dumb.

This appearance of naivité allowed him to get away with things most other comedians might not get away with.

Key

The key to Norm MacDonald is that he made the audience laugh by making them feel superior and pointing to common behaviors, observations, rules, signs, double-entendres that were relatable and contained a kind of whimsical disconnect.

Let's take a look at this video of Norm doing panel on Conan O'Brien. He tells this old joke about a moth. The joke would be categorized as a "Shaggy Dog". It's a long joke that has a punch line and sometimes just the fact that the joke takes so long to tell, makes it funny.

Norm McDonald - Moth Joke [napisy PL]

Understanding Norm MacDonald's philosophy toward comedy is important to understand Norm MacDonald. Norm was once quoted as saying:

> *"If you're watching a comedian on television and he's making a political point, I would say he's gotten too serious."*

I don't necessarily share the same position and I would sometimes argue that you reach the next level if you can make a serious political point but still make it funny. That's where the key lies, in my opinion.

George Carlin was a big believer in saying something that means something. Carlin's socio-political comedy helped to change obscenity laws in the United States.

But for Norm MacDonald it was his **ambivalence** toward these issues that made him funny.

I want you to really zero in on that word with laser beam focus because when I think of Norm MacDonald, I think of utter ambivalence and absurdity.

Norm never got mad at anything, but saw the whimsy in everything.

Watch this opening hosting spot he does on Gotham City Comedy

Norm MacDonald | Gotham Comedy Live

Ambivalence
Non-sequiturs
Reverse
Another reverse (compare & contrast / he said/she said)

Approach to Hecklers

Norm was heckled as much as any comedian, but he had a unique approach to dealing with hecklers. He didn't get mad. Listen to this audio of how Norm handles a heckler who tells him in the middle of his show that he's not very funny.

Norm Macdonald Turns a Heckler into a Friend

A Look at a Younger Norm MacDonald

Norm Macdonald: To Hell With Flossing | Late Night with Co…

Approach to Writing

I think much of Norm's approach to writing came from his persona. He would take a common situation and use his cynicism or ambivalent filter without ever getting angry, and that would propel him toward his jokes.

In a nutshell, Norm MacDonald would look at the whimsical disconnect between what's imposed on us and what the reality of it is when it's distilled down to its most basic concept.

With this approach toward your own observations there is literally an endless amount of material available for you to deconstruct.

1. Take an observation (Norm liked to take points of authority and break them down to simple facts).
2. Look at the simple explicitness of that observation like a metaphor or a colloquialism.
3. Shine a spotlight on it and look at it in its most basic form.

4. Spell it out to the audience.

Let's look at a few approaches to this.

You can apply this technique to simple words or phrases:

▶ Norm Macdonald - Everything Is Good Timing (2015) Just fo…

Notice how he took that phrase Club Super Sex then broke it down for the simple truth or double-entendre interpretation?

✍ Exercise

This is a typical trope that breaks down the figurative and literal interpretation of certain phrases. Try to build a bit around the following phrases. What story may have preceded these phrases?

Let's try this simple truth/double-entendre technique.

1. Emotional Baggage
2. Couch Potato
3. Speed Demon
4. Dirty Cop
5. Steep Learning Curve
6. Break the Ice

One technique that Norm MacDonald uses is simple truth. Very much in the same way you might see it approached by David Letterman, Jim Gaffigan, George Carlin.

Take a metaphorical phrase, a song lyric, bible scripture, look for the simple truth in that phrase then apply your cynical filter and describe it through that filter.



You can also expand on this approach using the Compare & Contrast, He said/She said approach.

Another approach to this is using the misunderstanding or misinterpretation idea. Which is a Compare & Contrast structure. In the case of interpersonal relationships there is a psychological disconnect between the actual way a man processes emotions or thoughts and how a woman processes emotions or thoughts.

Sometimes just stating these concepts then clarifying them to spotlight the disconnect is where the humor is. With these kinds of tropes the humor is in the recognition as well as the contrast. We're looking for the audience to go, *that's so true, I never thought about that way, or OMG my boyfriend/girlfriend does that all the time!*

Let's distill this down even further to phrases women say and what they really mean. This can work the other way around too.

Men and women have a different way of communicating. Men are very linear. They usually say what they mean. Women use more innuendo and a more indirect way of saying what they want.

This provides for a lot of humorous misinterpretations.

✍️ Exercise

Example:

Women say: I don't want to ruin our friendship.
What they mean: You'll never see me naked.

Take 3 phrases women say and 3 phrases men say and use the **simple truth interpretation** trope to break them down.

1. “Do whatever you want.”
2. “Gimme 5 minutes.”
3. “I forgive you.”

Now let’s flip this the other way around.

Men say: Who’s that guy?
What they really mean: Are you sleeping with him? Have you ever slept with him? Do you consider me attractive enough not to look at other guys?

1. “Nice shirt!”
2. “I’ve been really busy lately”
3. “Okay, I’m sorry”

✍️ Exercise

Taking it to the next level we can use a cynical approach to one of the pinnacles of authority and hypocrisy, the Bible. Take these bible verses and apply double entendre or simple truth to them to reveal the absurdity.

1. **Leviticus 24:16 -** Whoever utters the name of the Lord must be put to death. The whole community must stone him whether alien or native. If he utters the name, he must be put to death.
2. **Deuteronomy 28:53 -** Then because of the dire straights to which you will be reduced when your enemy besieges you, you will eat your own children, the flesh of your sons and daughters whom the Lord has given you.

If you haven't noticed yet, my comedy aficionados, I think Norm MacDonald got a lot of his persona from David Letterman. I think he was inspired quite a bit by David Letterman. His ability to identify irony in the quirkiest of situations and delivered to us with the use of the old filler, "I uh…"

Also, I think Norm MacDonald had a lot of pain that he kept hidden. I remember seeing Norm for the first time and thinking "He seems sad." This is what made me like him so much.

He was smart, observant, ambivalent, quick-witted, unwavering, but had a soft side to him that was rarely revealed.

You get to see it in this clip of his last appearance on the Late Show with David Letterman.

Norm MacDonald's Final Stand-Up Performance On Letterman

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

