

How to

Add

Humor

to Any

Speech

By Joe Cooke, ACB

Learn how to make people laugh. You'll have more fun and the listeners will too!

Listeners appreciate a little humor, even in a serious speech. Done incorrectly, humor can be a disaster. Executed correctly, humor lightens the load, eases the burden and releases

tension. There are three basic methods for adding humor to a speech: Tell a canned joke, tell an original joke or simply make a wry observation.

Method #1: Canned Jokes

The beauty of a canned joke is that it has usually withstood the test of time. For someone just starting to add humor, this is the best technique. By telling an old standby, you can concentrate on timing and delivery – two of the major keys to being funny.

Timing and Delivery: This refers to the way you present a joke. These two ideas may be the most important aspects of humor. As Toastmasters, we know that communication is more than just words. When you deliver a joke, your attitude alone can make or break the punch line.

But you have to get over the idea that you have to be perfect. Your audience wants you to succeed, and they want to laugh.

One of our newer members served as Toastmaster for the first time. She opened with a joke, stumbling through it. Even though she had to read the joke and even apologized to us ahead of time for her lack of experience, she told the joke with a smile and a wink. We laughed!

Audacity and an air of confidence can overcome your worst fears. Just say to yourself, “Okay, I’m terrified. I might botch the punch line, I might forget the entire joke; maybe no one will laugh. But I’m going to do it anyway. It will be hard this first time, but easier the next and the next and the next.”

The basic keys to adding humor to your speech are:

- relevance, and
- unexpected insight.

Let’s say you were doing a talk about ESPN or sports fanatics or even just sports in general. You might try the following “used” joke:

“A sports-buff showed up at the sold-out football game. He took his seat on the 50-yard line and then gently placed a woman’s coat and an extra ticket on the seat next to him. The spectator behind him asked, ‘Are you saving that seat for someone?’”

The man said, “No. It would have been for my wife, but she’s passed on.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that,” the spectator said. Then he added, “Gosh, why didn’t you give that extra ticket to a friend?”

The man turned around with a surprised look on his face and said, “All my friends are at the funeral.”

This joke is obviously *relevant* to a sports-oriented talk. It sets the theme of the speech and warms up the audience.

The *insight* is that we sometimes get so wrapped up in our own stuff that we forget about other people. We all

do it. This guy just did it bigger and that makes it funny.

Try out this joke (or any other) on several friends. Practice timing the punch line. Try different wording to make it your own. Try out different pacing, pausing in various places for emphasis. Like any other skill, you learn to tell a joke by practicing. Most people who claim they don’t know any jokes are simply saying that they haven’t practiced any.

Most canned jokes are generic and you don’t have to attribute your source. However, if you are relating something specific to a certain comedian, you should give proper credit. Use your best judgment. You may want to

“Audacity and an air of confidence can overcome your worst fears.”

say something like, “As Steve Martin so aptly put it: ‘The new phone book is here! The new phone book is here!’” But don’t start your joke with “I got this off the Internet...” Just launch into it.

Once you become comfortable telling jokes you’ve found from other sources, take your humor up a notch by trying out some original material.

Method #2: New Material

There is a basic three-point structure you can follow to create your own, original material:

- Come up with a topic,
- Add a premise, and
- Turn it around.

Here’s how it works: First, come up with a topic. For example, if you are a parent, you might want to make a joke about being a father or a mother. Here’s a caveat. If you are a woman, don’t choose the topic of being a father. The audience won’t be able to relate through you.

Next, create a premise. Let’s say you are making a joke about being a dad. Your premise might be that it’s hard to be a dad. Or, that having kids makes men a bit stupid. Or weird. Or that having kids is scary.

Comedy trainer Judy Carter uses those four specific words when she is training people to be funny. She calls them “attitude” words. When you are just beginning to experiment with writing your own material, it is best to stick with the basics:

- Algebra homework is hard.
- Skateboarding on the highway is stupid.
- Being a dad is weird.
- Being tall around toddlers is scary.

Tools for Comics

Share your favorite joke with other speakers by posting it to www.breakingthefunnybone.blogspot.com and check out the following bonus links:

- For an audio example of a re-worked version of the "Traveling with kids is hard" joke, follow the "Quit whining..." link. You'll also hear an example of a "canned joke" about shopping.
- For an example of how humor can be worked into a serious speech, follow the link titled "Subtle humor adds to a serious topic..." This is a streaming video of a short talk I gave describing my daughter's life-threatening condition. (Note: we helped raise over \$250,000 for a local charity that evening.)

Best books on developing funny material:

- *The Comedy Bible: From Stand-up to Sitcom – The Comedy Writer's Ultimate "How To" Guide*, by Judy Carter. Also, see www.comedyworkshops.com. The author gives a step-by-step process for creating humor, comedy and jokes from everyday life.
- *The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even If You're Not*, by John Vorhaus

The third part is the hard part. You have to bring in the unexpected. For instance, if you are working with "skateboarding on the highway is stupid," and you were being serious, you might finish with how dangerous it is. For a joke, look for insight. Look for pain.

Now, let's look at a concrete example:

- **Step one:** Choose a topic. Let's say you chose "parenting."
- **Step two:** Choose an attitude. For example, "raising kids is hard."
- **Step three:** Create a twist. First of all, what is hard about raising kids?

Maybe your answer is that you have to be more mature.

Now, think of a way to twist that around to surprise the audience. Here is how I used this topic to open my speech on traveling.

"Traveling with kids is hard! You gotta be tough, you know?"

We just got back from Disney World. We spent all day walking and it was hot and it was like, 'I need a drink of water, and I'm tired,' and 'I need to go potty.'

Finally, my six-year old put her hands on her hips and said, 'Dad, quit whining.'"

Timing and Delivery, Part II. Practice makes perfect. Although great material always sounds like it is impromptu, it

rarely is. With jokes, more than with anything else, practice is imperative. You have to practice until it sounds as if you are just making it up on the spot.

Record your joke delivery and then listen. After a while, you will get a good feel for the pace. You will hear where the pauses work and where they don't. Along the way, you'll memorize the joke. It will also stop sounding funny to you. Don't worry; your audience has never heard it.

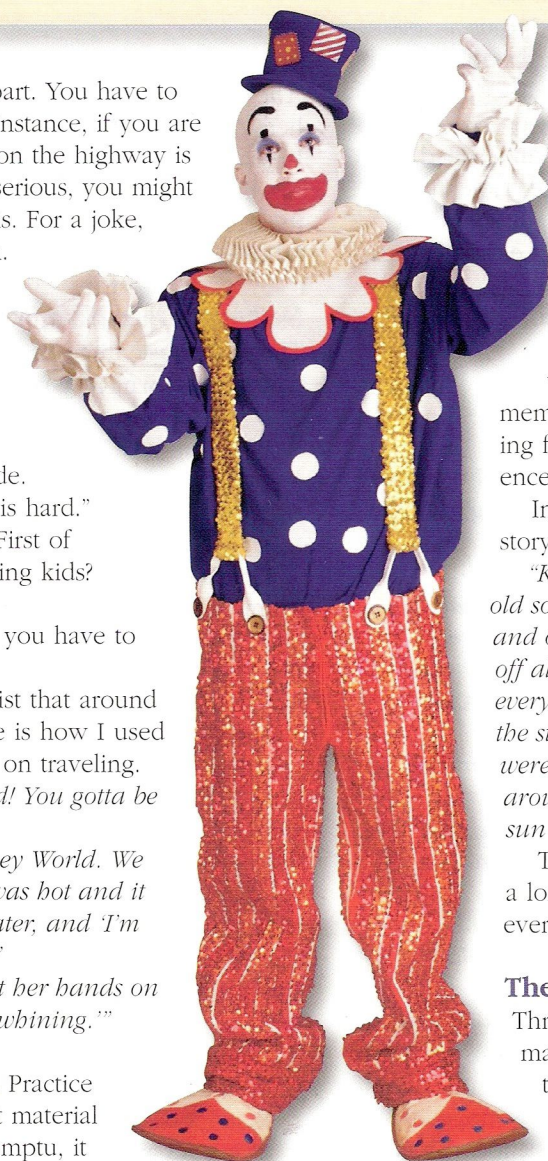
In my travelogue about Florida, I tell a story about my five-year old.

"Kids are wise, aren't they? My five-year old son played in the sprinklers at the park and on the ride back to our condo, he took off all his clothes. He got out of the car and everyone stared at him as he walked down the street, naked as can be. JoAnn and I were mortified, of course, but he just looked around and said, 'Well, at least I'm wearing sun block!'"

This story stopped being funny to me a long time ago, but whenever I tell it, everyone guffaws.

The Rule of Three

Three is an inherently funny number. Just make a list of three things. Throw out the last one and replace it with something outlandish. A word, a phrase. A dead fish.



Let's take the simple topic of sun block and play it out.

"Sun block is weird. (notice the attitude word) My wife packs SPF 44. Sun protection factor 44. Do you know what that means? That means that we can stay out in the sun 44 times longer with it on. Where are we going anyway? The Mojave Desert? The Sahara? The planet Mercury?"

Acting Out

Take your humor up another notch...act it out. Now take your rant against sun block and play it out even further:

"Have you ever noticed that the companies that make sun block make bug repellent too? You have to have both because they make the sun block smell like Piña Colodas. Of course it's going to attract bugs. They're like 'Yeah baby! It's cocktail hour!'"

Surviving the Joke

If you've practiced your jokes and bounced them off the right people ahead of time, you're sure to get some laughs. Even so, the day will come when the audience just doesn't get it. There are two ways to deal with the "bomb:"

One is the "saver." Powerhouse speaker J.R. Ridinger sometimes gets going so fast and furious that he leaves the audience behind. His favorite saver: "Maybe that one will catch you on the way home."

The other technique is to just keep on keeping on. One of my all-time favorite inspirational speakers once

"Sometimes a witty observation will produce no more than a smile or a twinkle in someone's eye. That's enough."

gave a sermon on sex. The funny quotes she told at the beginning left the audience speechless. She handled her choice of material like a true professional, never missing a beat, though I squirmed and turned a bit red.

Listening to this professional also showed me how confidence and audacity can pull off a joke that a less confident person could never get away with.

Method #3: Wry Observations

Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society. – Mark Twain



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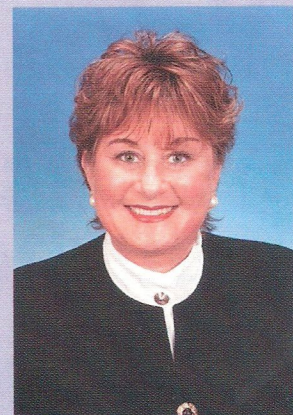
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One of the great masters of the witty statements, Mark Twain once said that electric lights were to humor as lightning was to wit. In other words, unlike a joke that has a story-line, natural wit usually comes out as a pointed, wry observation.

Use the triple-A method to develop your ability to make witty statements. First, be **A**ware, then add **A**ttitude and **A**llow yourself to grow.

“You have to develop an attitude that fits you and then you have to let it shine.”

Be aware by understanding that humor comes from understanding shared experiences, especially painful ones. In order to fully cultivate your own sense of humor, you have to stop seeing your life as completely tragic. We all have troubles. Open your eyes and your mind and watch for the irony and the contrast in life.

Your attitude will help you be funny. Watch any great comedian, male or female. Some are gutsy and loud, some are meek and shy. You have to develop an attitude that fits you and then you have to let it shine.

Finally, allow yourself to be funny. Open your mouth and try. Toastmasters is the perfect place to nurture your inner comic. Occasionally you may tell a stinker. Get over it and try again. Progress only comes with practice in front of real people.

You don't have to elicit a roar of laughter from your audience. Sometimes a witty observation will produce no more than a smile or a twinkle in someone's eye.

That's enough.


Remember that Toastmasters is a learning organization. Give yourself permission to try, and trust that your fellow members are either (a) wishing they were as brave as you and respecting you for it, (b) about in the same

place on the progress curve as you are and respecting you for it, or (c) re-living the time they first tried humor and respecting you for doing the same.

Now, get out there. Be yourself, be happy and be confident. Long after your listeners have forgotten the content of your speech, they will still remember how you made them feel. **T**

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