The 4 Rules of Comedy Writing For Screenwriters

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Total absence of humor renders life impossible.

Colette

As the saying goes, "Funny is money." The person who can write funny has a definite edge over the person who finds it difficult.

So if you're humor challenged when it comes to dialogue, what can you do about it?

In my experience, writing funny, original dialogue comes naturally, just as spontaneously adlibbing funny, clever remarks does. You can either do it or you can't.

I wish I could say "Take a comedy writing class" or "Read a book on how to write funny stuff" or offer you some inspirational words of wisdom on finding your inner stand-up comic.

What I can offer you is something Tim Allen said in a TV Guide interview upon being asked about his sense of humor, specifically his ability to be funny. "Being (italics mine) funny is a gift to me. I don't know where it comes from. It's magic and it's marvelous and I'm terrified it will all go   away."

Where does it come from? Who knows? Where does superior natural athletic prowess come from? Why is one 6'8" kid who plays forward on his high school team, better than fifty other 6'8" forwards on other high school teams? For every Lebron James there's 10,000 kids who aren't quite good enough.

The First Rule of Writing Funny:

• Just because you can say funny things doesn't mean you can write funny things

Writing funny is different than saying or doing funny things. Lots of men and women who crack up their friends and co-workers are incapable of writing funny dialogue. Adolescent boys who can't get attention from girls by excelling at sports, their looks or intelligence resort to goofball antics either physical or verbal. But that only goes so far and lasts so long. The kid whose talent is shoving a slice of pizza up his nose will be trumped by the boy who has figured out that girls get bored quickly with silliness and prefer someone who can amuse them with wit.

This funny boy will likely blossom into a funny man and will find that his gift will be a big plus in his social life.

And it will come in especially handy if he sets his sights on being a screenwriter.

In real life most people can't tell a joke or a story, especially a funny one. They lose their focus, deliver the punch line too soon, go off on a tangent, leave out an important detail or sink into a meandering blur. They've lost their audience. As the author of a screenplay that's a comedy, your audience is much tougher and unforgiving: agents, producers, development people, creative executives and managers.

You have to keep that agent laughing from the first page--especially the first page--because if she's enjoying herself by the time she gets to the bottom she'll definitely turn to Page two. And if you keep the laughs coming for the next ten and the rest of the first Act you can feel pretty confident she'll finish the rest of the script--provided you have a compelling story.

Which leads us to The Second Rule of Writing Funny:

• A strong story without a lot of laughs is preferable to a weak story with three jokes per page

Many comedies falter because of a flimsy or dimwitted plot. Ultimately, no matter how many laughs a script has, if the story isn't absorbing enough for somebody to sink his teeth into, it won't get read to the final Fade Out. As we're laughing at things your characters are saying and doing, we must care about them and root for them to get whatever it is they want (no matter how goofy). If that want isn't there we're not going along for that ride no matter how amusing it might be.

There's an old maxim in baseball: "I'd rather be lucky than talented." When it comes to a comedy screenplay, I'd rather have a solid story than plenty of laughs. Laughs can be put in. Maybe not by you, but if it's a great story your chance of getting an agent or a deal has just gotten closer to the goal line. If you have a 103-page script with lots of laughs but a mediocre story, well, it's a lot harder to punch up a plot.

The Third Rule of Writing Funny:

• Two heads can be better than one

Let's say you're a serious, reliable screenwriter with a clear understanding of not only the 3-Act Structure, but 5-Act and 7-Act structures, as well. You know that characters should be three-dimensional, have internal and external conflicts and be properly motivated.

You've immersed yourself in Joseph Campbell and Chrisopher Vogler so you know the 12 Stages of the Hero's Journey inside and out. You've read all the screenwriting books (especially mine The Screenwriter Within), gone to the important seminars, studied, analyzed and deconstructed films, read the key biographies and autobiographies of screenwriters (Adventures In The Screen Trade, The Devil's Guide To Hollywood, Bambi Vs Godzilla to name a few) and subscribed to the best screenwriting magazines.

There's only one problem: you are incapable of writing a funny line of dialogue. Unfortunately, all the ideas you come up with are way too serious and downbeat (like that bio-pic on Damien the Leper you've been mulling over for three years).

You need to get together with a certain kind of person. The off the wall, rapid fire, life of the party, grown up class clown who has the ability to write jokes, great set pieces and funny lines and is hilarious 24/7, but if his or her life depended on it, couldn't come up with a story and write a script.

It's the perfect convergence of talent.

Check the credits on sitcoms. You'll find at least one and often two writing teams on every show. Same with screenplays. It's fair to assume that most of these teams got together because they each brought their strength to the table.

Finding your writing soul mate isn't easy. It's like finding someone to marry. You have to look around, see how you get on and hope that it works.

If it does work you'll both be in a much better place than going it alone.

The Fourth rule of Writing Funny:

• Find your genre

When we go to a Farrely Brothers movie we expect a certain kind of product. Lots of gross out humor in largely unrealistic, high concept plots with a handful of genuinely inspired lines and moments. Woody Allen films, especially his early and mid-career efforts offered a witty, neurotic take on the human condition, especially romance. His fans know that we were going to see a unique, intellectual kind of creativity and wit. If Judd Apatow's name is on a film be it writer, producer or director we know it'll be something high concept with an abundance of sex jokes, but with an undertone of sweetness.

The thing is, depending upon the kind of comedy you're writing, you may not need to be as funny as these guys.

Romantic comedies need laughs, but not tons of them. Take two Reese Witherspoon films. Sweet Home Alabama wasn't a laugh a minute. Neither was Legally Blonde, but it was funnier and had a higher concept. Both had compelling stories.

Guy comedies (or buddy comedies) need more laughs than a romantic comedy. Think I Love You, Man, Wedding Crashers, Talladega Nights, The Pineapple Express or Role Models.

Let's look at television. I used to hear people refer to Sex and The City as a sitcom. It wasn't. It was a drama with occasional laughs. No one watched Sex and The City for the humor (and nobody went to the film version expecting to laugh out loud for two hours), as opposed to

Seinfeld, Family Guy or 30 Rock. Same with Entourage. Is it a sitcom? Not really. Parts of every episode are hilarious. But it's really a drama with laughs that come from character.

Sitcom writers have an expression for the parts of a script where there are intentionally no laugh lines: laying pipe. Information crucial to the plot is given. Comedy screenplays are allowed to have some laying pipe sections, but not many. And there shouldn't be one in the first 15 pages. You have to keep the laughs coming.

So if you want to write a big, broad comedy (Tropic Thunder, Dodgeball, Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy, Dumb and Dumber) your script better be funny as hell from first page to last.

So if you want to write a romantic comedy or something serio/comic (serious topic with laughs) or a comedy/drama (lighthearted story with a serious or sentimental turn) you don't necessarily have to have 3-6 laughs per page. Once again, here is where having a solid story will supersede lots of laughs.

In conclusion, can someone be taught to write comedy? Yes. Just like someone can be taught how to cook. If you take cooking classes, read a bunch of cookbooks, watch Food TV and spend enough time in the kitchen trying out recipes, you'll be able to prepare a meal that you won't be ashamed of.

Learning to write comedy is pretty much the same. You can find a class or program on sitcom writing, improv and stand up. You can read books on comedy writing (Writing The Romantic Comedy is very good, as is What Are You Laughing At?: How to Write Funny Screenplays, Stories, and More). You can study comedies (you'll learn more from the bad ones, than the good).

Lastly, if you don't want to collaborate and if your heart is set on writing comedies, just keep staring at that scene that needs punching up until a funny line pops into your head. Then do it again and again and again. Just don't try to analyze what's funny or figure out where it comes from. E.B. White said it best: "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it."

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