

## Forty five Ways to Make 'Em Laugh

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### Abstract

This article uses 45 techniques of humor that I believe explain more adequately than other theories of humor what it is that generates humor in texts of all kinds. In the essay I use the 45 techniques to analyze/deconstruct a number of jokes. Then I show how different disciplines analyze a joke to suggest that humor is a very complicated phenomenon that people with different perspectives see in various ways. I deal with the 45 techniques in more detail in a number of books, such as *The Art of Comedy Writing* which discusses each of the techniques and uses them to analyze dramatic comedies from Plautus to Ionesco.

**Keywords:** techniques, morphology, structure, disciplines, jokes

Social scientists have discovered that the average person laughs fifteen times in a typical day (See Robert R. Provine 2001, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. New York, N.Y: Penguin Press). We also know that most of the time we laugh at things that happen in our everyday lives; mistakes people make, comic insults, misunderstandings, revelations of ignorance or stupidity and that kind of thing, rather than jokes.

### How to Be Funny Without Telling Jokes, for People

#### Who Tell Jokes Without Being Funny?

Jokes, technically speaking, can be defined as short narratives, meant to amuse and generate mirthful laughter, that end with a punch line. In the case of shaggy dog stories, the narratives can be relatively long, but still, as a rule, jokes are rather short texts. Many people think the way to be funny, and gain the social benefits derived from being amusing, is to tell jokes. I think this is a bad idea, for three reasons.

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1. *The joke may be lousy.* If you tell a joke that isn't funny, you'll mildly antagonize people who expect to be entertained and amused.
2. *You may not tell jokes well.* Even if you have a good joke, if you don't tell it well, people won't be amused.
3. *Your listener(s) may have already heard the joke.* This forces people to pretend to be amused and fake laughter, which can be quite painful.

This list suggests several questions. First, how can you be funny without telling jokes and second, what makes a joke funny—that is, how do jokes work? My answer to these questions is that we should use the techniques of humor found in jokes and other kinds of humor to create our own humor, based on our personalities and our comedic tendencies.

#### *Forty-Five Ways to Make People Laugh*

Many years ago I made a large content analysis project in which I looked for the techniques found in humorous texts of all kinds—jokes, dramatic comedies, funny short stories and novels, joke books, and anything else I could find that was humorous. I focused on the techniques that made these texts humorous. What I came up with were forty-five techniques that I believe inform all humorous works. These are, I argue, the building blocks of all humor. I dealt with them in a number of books such as *An Anatomy of Humor* (Transaction, 1993), *The Art of Comedy Writing* (Transaction, 1997) and *Blind Men and Elephants* (Transaction, 1995) as well as a number of articles in a variety of journals. And I can show them at work in jokes, some of which, it turns out, are complex texts that utilize a number of techniques to generate laughter. My techniques are similar in nature to Vladimir Propp's "functions" in fairy tales and many of the chapters in this book are informed by a semiotic approach to humor (see "A Glossary of the Techniques of Humor or Morphology of the Joke-Tale" in my *An Anatomy of Humor*).

I should point out that I make a distinction between why people laugh and what makes people laugh. They are different matters. Nobody knows why we laugh, though over the millennia, philosophers, psychologists, sages, theorists of one kind or another, have tried to answer this question. Aristotle suggested, for example, that we laugh at people who are ridiculous, which suggests that *superiority* is the reason why we laugh (Aristotle, "Poetics"). Other philosophers have suggested that *incongruity* is the basis of all humor; we expect something and get

something else. You find this in the punch lines of jokes. Freud and a number of psychoanalytically inclined scholars suggest that *masked aggression* is the basis of humor (Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*). Gregory Bateson and others like him have argued that humor involves cognition and various forms of *processing communication* and of meta-communications to generate humor. There are endless theories on why people laugh, but no general agreement on the matter, though I would suggest that incongruity theories tend to be dominant.

I leave the “Why” theories of humor to others. What I have done, instead, is to focus on what makes people laugh and this led me to find some forty-five techniques of humor. They are listed below. In Figure 1, on the technique of humor according to category, I found all the techniques could be fit into a classification system with four categories: Language, Logic, Identity and Action (or visual humor). The second chart enumerates the techniques and lists them alphabetically. Most people can understand what each of these techniques means. I should point out that in a number of cases, the reverse of a technique can be used; for example, exaggeration and its opposite understatement.

<b>LANGUAGE</b>	<b>LOGIC</b>	<b>IDENTITY</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
Allusion	Absurdity	Before/After	Chase
Bombast	Accident	Burlesque	Slapstick
Definition	Analogy	Caricature	Speed
Exaggeration	Catalogue	Eccentricity	
Facetiousness	Coincidence	Embarrassment	
Insults	Comparison	Exposure	
Infantilism	Disappointment	Grotesque	
Irony	Ignorance	Imitation	
Misunderstanding	Mistakes	Impersonation	
Over literalness	Repetition	Mimicry	
Puns/Wordplay	Reversal	Parody	
Repartee	Rigidity	Scale	
Ridicule	Theme & Var.	Stereotype	
Sarcasm	Unmasking		
Satire			

*Fig. 1 Techniques of Humor According to Category*

Now I offer a list in which the techniques are numbered and assembled in alphabetical order. Enumerating the techniques is useful when we want to use them to deconstruct a humorous text.

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|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Absurdity       | 16. Embarrassment    | 31. Parody             |
| 2. Accident        | 17. Exaggeration     | 32. Puns               |
| 3. Allusion        | 18. Exposure         | 33. Repartee           |
| 4. Analogy         | 19. Facetiousness    | 34. Repetition         |
| 5. Before/After    | 20. Grotesque        | 35. Reversal           |
| 6. Bombast         | 21. Ignorance        | 36. Ridicule           |
| 7. Burlesque       | 22. Imitation        | 37. Rigidity           |
| 8. Caricature      | 23. Impersonation    | 38. Sarcasm            |
| 9. Catalogue       | 24. Infantilism      | 39. Satire             |
| 10. Chase Scene    | 25. Insults          | 40. Scale, Size        |
| 11. Coincidence    | 26. Irony            | 41. Slapstick          |
| 12. Comparison     | 27. Literalness      | 42. Speed              |
| 13. Definition     | 28. Mimicry          | 43. Stereotypes        |
| 14. Disappointment | 29. Mistakes         | 44. Theme & Variation. |
| 15. Eccentricity   | 30. Misunderstanding | 45. Unmasking          |

*Fig.2 Techniques of Humor in Alphabetical Order*

Now I will use these techniques to deconstruct some jokes. I should point out that before I retired from the Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts Department at San Francisco State University, I taught courses on comedy writing and situation comedy writing for a number of years. I had them read a book I wrote, *The Art of Comedy Writing*, which deals with each of the techniques and shows how playwrights have used them over the past two thousand years.

I offer analyses in the book of *Miles Gloriosus*, *Twelfth Night*, *The School for Scandal* and *The Bald Soprano*. What I show is that from Roman comedies to the Theater of the Absurd, playwrights have used the same techniques.

Here are some sample analyses to give you an idea of the way that these 45 techniques can be used to deconstruct (some would say destruct) humor.

1. A person calls Radio Erevan and asks, "Is it true that comrade Gorshinko won 5000 rubles at the lottery?" "Yes," replies Radio Erevan. "But it was not comrade Gorshinko but comrade Kataev, and it was not 5000 rubles but 10,000 rubles, and he didn't win it at the lottery but lost it gambling."

In this joke, we find the dominant technique is number 35, reversal. Radio Erevan says "yes" to the question but reverses every part of the event involving comrade Gorshinko. We also find technique 39, satire. These Radio Erevan jokes satirize Russian politics, socialism and related concerns. [Note: This joke is analyzed in considerable detail in my article "What's in a Joke? A Microanalysis: in *Elementa: Journal of Slavic Languages and Comparative Study*. Spring, 1994]. One of the most famous of these Radio Erevan jokes goes as follows:

\ A caller asks Radio Erevan, "Would it be possible to bring Socialism to the Sahara?"  
"Yes," replies Radio Erevan, "But after the first five year plan, we'll have to import sand."

2. Jack eating rotten cheese did say,  
Like Samson I my thousands slay;

I vow, quoth Roger, so you do.  
And with the self-same weapon, too.

*Benjamin Franklin*

This joke is based on number 3, an allusion. In the Bible, Samson kills thousands with the jaw of an ass. So we also have 4, Analogy (Jack's jaw and the jaw of an ass) and 25, Insult.

3. Why did the moron bring a ladder to the party?  
He heard the drinks were on the house!

This rather simple joke is based on 30, Misunderstanding and 27 over literalness.

4. A man goes to Miami for a vacation. After four days he notices he has a tan all over his body, except for his penis. So the next day he goes to a deserted area of the beach early in the morning, takes his clothes off and lies down. He sprinkles sand over himself until all that remains in the sun is his penis. Two little old ladies walk by on the boardwalk and one notices the penis. "When I was 20," she says, "I was scared to death of them. When I was 40, I couldn't get enough of them. When I was 60, I couldn't get one to come near me....and now they're growing wild on the beach."

In this joke, we have a number of techniques at work. We have 15, Eccentricity. The man feels that he must have every bit of his body tanned, even his penis. We also find technique 29, Mistakes. The old lady thinks (maybe hopes) that penises are growing wild on the beach. And we have 18, Exposure—the exhibitionism of the man and the sexual desire of the woman.

5. The United Nations asks a group of scholars to write a book on Elephants. The following books are contributed: The French write "The Love Life of the Elephant." The English write "The Elephant and English Social Classes." The Germans write "A Short Introduction to the Elephant in Five Volumes." The Jews write "Elephants and The Jewish Question."

This joke is based on number 43, Stereotypes as the dominant technique. One might also consider 44, Theme and Variation, as well as 39 Satire to be operating in this joke.

6. A minister returns unexpectedly early to his house and finds the strong smell of cigar smoke and his wife naked in bed. He looks out the window and sees a priest smoking a big cigar walking out of the door of his apartment house. In a jealous rage he picks up the refrigerator and throws it on the priest, killing him instantly. Then, smitten by remorse he jumps out the window and kills himself. The next instant, the minister, the priest and a rabbi appear before an angel at the Pearly Gates. "What happened?" the angel asks the

priest. "I was walking out of this house and a refrigerator fell on me," said the priest." "And you?" asks the angel to the minister. "I threw the refrigerator on the priest and then felt so bad I killed myself." "And you?" asks the angel to the rabbi. "You've got me," says the rabbi. "I was minding my own business...smoking a cigar in a refrigerator...."

Here we start off with 11, Coincidence. The minister returns early and finds a strong smell of cigar smoke. Then we have 29, Mistakes. He assumes the priest he sees is the source of the cigar smoke. Finally, we have 29, Facetiousness—in which the rabbi explains that he was minding his own business, smoking a cigar in a refrigerator.

## Discussion

Understanding and applying the techniques that are used to generate humor in jokes and other humorous texts can be used to create one's own humor. Theory, we can say, is the flip side of the coin of practice, and an understanding of the techniques of humor enables us to understand how jokes work, and by extension how texts of all kinds generate humor.

There is another approach to humor which complements my use of forty-five techniques, and it is humorous itself because it shows how different disciplines analyze humorous texts. One of my books, *Blind Men and Elephants*, does this in much more detail, but the example that follows gives a good idea of how different disciplinary approaches make sense of humor. I will offer a joke and then present eight different interpretations of the joke, each one based on a particular discipline or perspective.

A man walks into a bar. "I'm Jim," he says to the bartender. "I'm gay. Will you serve me?" "Sure," says the bartender. "What will you have?" "A beer," says Jim. The next day Jim walks into the bar, with another man. "This is my brother Bob," he says to the bartender. "He's gay. Will you serve us?" "Of course," says the bartender. "What'll you guys have?" "Two beers," says Jim. The next day Jim and Bob walk into the bar accompanied by another man. "This is my brother Sam," says Jim. "He's gay. Will you serve us?" "Yes," says the bartender. "What do you guys want?" "Three beers" says Jim. After the bartender serves the men the beers he asks "Does anyone in your family like women?" "Of course," says Jim. "Our sister Sally does, but she doesn't drink."

Let's see, now, how each of our scholars analyzes this joke. These analyses will be brief and are meant to suggest the kinds of thing people with different perspectives concern themselves with when dealing with a joke or any humorous text.

## **Theoretical Explanations**

### **The Rhetorician**

For our purposes, the rhetorician will focus on the forty-five techniques, described above, used to generate the humor in this text. The most important technique, I would suggest, is number 14, "Disappointment and Defeated Expectations." The punch line in this joke, "Of course," suggests that at least one member of the family is heterosexual, but it turns out not to be the case, for the member of the family that likes women is a woman, and thus the family remains firmly homosexual. In this respect, it is most unusual and thus we find number 15, the technique of eccentricity, comic types and that kind of thing, at work, also. In addition, there is number 34, Repetition, in which we are introduced to the first, second and third brother, thus heightening the significance of the question by the bartender ("Doesn't anyone in your family like women?") and of the punch line ("Of course...our sister Sally does...").

### **Semiotic Analysis**

One important technique semioticians use when they deal with texts, is to consider their paradigmatic structure--the set of oppositions found in them (some would say read into them) that give them meaning. This method was used brilliantly by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (*Structural Anthropology*, Garden City, NY. 1967). Concepts have meaning, Ferdinand de Saussure argued in his *Course in General Linguistics*, (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1966) due to their relationships with other concepts; nothing has meaning in itself. And, as Roman Jakobson (see J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the study of Literature*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976.) has argued, it is through binary oppositions that most people find meaning in things. Thus, a paradigmatic analysis of this joke would yield the following set of oppositions:



NORMAL

Heterosexuality

Bartender

Males like Women

DEVIANT

Homosexuality

Brothers and their Sister

Females like Women

The joke is based on this set of linked notions that are found under each main concept. Listeners to the joke don't necessarily bring this set of oppositions to mind, but they must recognize these oppositions if the joke is to make any sense and the punch line is to be effective. When the bartender asks whether anyone in the family likes women, the question assumes the polarity between normal and so-called "deviant" (we cannot use negations in making our oppositions because they don't tell us enough). The bartender assumed he was asking about males in the family who liked women, about people who were "normal." The punch line only makes sense in that context, and its humor comes from the way it defeats our expectation of normalcy.

**Communication Theory**

Communication theory is a very broad field. In my book *Blind Men and Elephants*, I deal with Roman Jakobson's model, which involves an addresser, an addressee, coding and decoding of a message, etc. I point out that according to some communications theorists, a message has information to the extent that it has a surprise. Thus, all jokes, since they have punch lines, contain information. In this joke, the information conveyed by the punch line is that the sister of the gay brothers is a Lesbian and thus, all the children in the family are gay.

We also have to consider the matter of aberrant decoding, a situation in which a person does not interpret a message the way the sender wants the message to be interpreted. For a joke to work, the addressee must understand the message and have the same assumptions the sender has. Thus, when the bartender asks "Does anyone in your family like women?" the addressee must interpret that question correctly and assume, correctly, that the bartender is talking about heterosexual relationships. That is what sets up the punch line, "Of course. Our sister Sally does...but she doesn't drink." That's why she hasn't come to the bar.

### **Psychological and Psychoanalytic**

From the psychological and psychoanalytic perspective, it is the sexuality of the members of the family that is of paramount importance. The heroes of this little story are gay men, all of whom are members of the same family. What this joke does, however, is place homosexuality in a different light, as something relatively normal. It plays with the listener, who is tricked by the punch line. The bartender has really asked, in a roundabout way, isn't anyone in your family normal? What's normal in one family is not normal in another. Seen this way, the joke is liberating and frees us from being bound by conventional ideas. This notion that humor can be "liberating" is a very important one, for it suggests that humor has intrinsic therapeutic value, which may explain why so many people feel the need to experience humor on a daily basis. See Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and Harvey Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation* (Los Angeles, Nash Publishing, 1971)

### **Sociological Analysis**

Using the sociological interest in functionalism, we may ask--What are the functions of this joke for the teller and the listener? First, telling the joke helps build a sense of togetherness and helps integrate the teller and the listener into a group (those listening to the joke). The manifest function of telling the joke is to amuse others, to be looked upon favorably as someone who has a sense of humor, who is amusing and entertaining. We can say this about joke telling in general. But the latent function of the joke is to establish more strongly, to firm up the teller's (and listener's) heterosexual identity, to demonstrate that one is "normal" by laughing at those who are supposedly not normal. But the joke is not really a hostile one; it is amusing and tricks the listener, whose assumptions are shown to be false. So the joke demonstrates that one is not a hater of gay people but, instead, one who might be seen as somewhat sympathetic to them. Finally, telling this joke can be seen as a functional alternative to hostile and perhaps even violent behavior. Humor is a means of dealing with aggressive tendencies a person might have verbally rather than physically and telling jokes is a way of dealing with hostility in an acceptable, relatively speaking, manner.

## Philosophy

Philosophers have generally concerned themselves with the nature of humor in general, its ontological status, and that kind of thing. Aristotle argued that we laugh at people we see as ridiculous, as inferior to ourselves (Aristotle, *Poetics*). He is one of the fathers of the "superiority" theory of humor. From this perspective, the humor in the joke comes from our being able to feel superior to the gay brothers and their Lesbian sister.

Henri Bergson (*Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*) argued that humor involves "the mechanical encrusted on the living" and suggested that this manifests itself in many ways, one of which was comic types. By this he meant people who are fixated, rigid, and inflexible--such as misers and misanthropes. Wherever you have a type, he wrote, you have humor. The gay brothers in this joke represent comic types; there's something mechanical and rigid here (all children in the family are gay) where there should be flexibility and variety. The question the bartender asks, as a matter of fact, is based on this notion of flexibility and variety. But the punch line shows that the family is all gay, thus defeating our expectations of normalcy, flexibility and so on.

## Political Science

Let me say something here about the work of Aaron Wildavsky (see Aaron Wildavsky and Arthur Asa Berger, "Who Laughs at What?", *Society*, 1994), a distinguished political scientist, who had a wonderful sense of humor. He has suggested, in a number of essays and books, that there are four political cultures found in democratic societies (he actually has revised things and added a fifth one, but it is small and not significant for our purposes). These cultures are formed due to the nature of the prescriptions groups place on members of groups (many or few) and the boundaries that exist among groups (weak or strong). We end up with four political cultures: egalitarians, (hierarchical) elitists, (competitive) individualists and fatalists. People sometimes change political cultures and are not locked into a given group for life, though fatalists generally find it difficult to escape from that position.

I would suggest, pushing things to extremes perhaps, that a given joke, based on the values it supports or attacks, should appeal primarily to one of these political cultures (or people moving

toward a given political culture), since it reinforces their beliefs. Conversely, it should not appeal to the other groups since it attacks their values and generate cognitive dissonance.

In this context, the joke would be seen as essentially an egalitarian one, since it presents homosexuality in a relatively benign manner. The joke, we might say, "normalizes" homosexuality and, by doing so, appeals to egalitarian values, which stress the things that people have in common rather than those that divide them, and the equality of needs we all have. An elitist joke would have made gays objects of ridicule and suggested that gays are inferior to heterosexuals. A fatalist joke would have suggested that being gay was a matter of bad luck or something like that, and that there was nothing for gays to do except resign themselves to their fate, to persecution and that kind of thing. And a competitive individualist joke might involve something like seeing who could bash gays more.

We might also remember that humor can be used to control people (especially in small groups) or to resist control. The joke might be seen as a means of resisting control. The gays, who are the heroes of the joke, show a bit of anxiety about their marginal status ("We're gay. Will you serve us?") but also feel at ease, since each member of the family is gay. Gay bashing jokes are attempts to stigmatize homosexuals and isolate them and, in doing so, control them. Jokes that treat gays as relatively ordinary members of society, as no more eccentric or weird than all kinds of other people, have the opposite effect and can be seen as a form of resistance.

### **A Feminist Perspective**

Finally, let me offer what I think would be a feminist perspective. The joke assumes a phallogocentric world--one in which normalcy involves men liking women. Remember that the punch line is based on a question the bartender asks the brothers. "Doesn't anyone in your family like women?" This question, as I've indicated earlier, assumes a heterosexual orientation in contrast to the three brothers, each of whom is gay. When the bartender asked this question, he thought he was asking whether there were any males in the family who were heterosexual. Asking this question privileges the phallus and, in addition, focuses attention on male sexuality. It indicates the existence of a patriarchal society in which women are of secondary importance in the scheme of things. This is the case even though all the children in the family (that we are told about) are homosexuals.

We might note, also, that Sally, the sister, is only mentioned; she is not actually brought into the bar, like each of the three brothers. Thus, she ends up playing the traditional feminine role: she is a bystander, a person on the sidelines, who is talked about but who does not actually participate in the action in the joke. This is so even though her lesbianism is the basis for the punch line.

This brings us to the end of our survey. I have tried to suggest how each perspective, discipline, methodology (or whatever) might make sense of the joke about the three brothers in the bar. Each perspective examines a different facet of the joke, and while a joke may not be completely illuminated by a given perspective, it does offer important insights which, when put together with other ones, does a good job of explaining and interpreting the joke in a relatively complete and interesting manner. I would suggest that using the forty-five techniques and considering how different disciplines might analyze a text gives us the most complete and satisfying analysis of humorous texts. These techniques and their analysis in various disciplines are explained and exemplified in my books on humor discussed above and listed below.

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