The Short Humor Writing Cheat Sheet

About Me
I’m Alex Baia, humor writer and contributor to McSweeney’s, The New Yorker, and Medium; an editor of the humor site Slackjaw; and I run hyoom.com, a site full of humorous writing, essays, and interviews with amazing writers. Here’s my monthly humor newsletter.

About This Cheat Sheet
• This cheat sheet includes resources for studying, writing, and publishing short humor. I mainly cover short, conceptual humor pieces. Though I don’t directly cover other forms (essays, comedic short stories, etc.), I think you’ll find useful stuff here for any type of funny writing.

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Basic Comedic Terms and Tools
• Premise: Short humor writing typically has a comedic premise. The premise is the main joke of the piece. Other good ways to define a humor premise are:
  ○ The main thing that’s funny about the piece.
○ The overriding, unusual thing in the piece that makes it work comedically.
○ The “game of the piece” that the author is playing.
○ The main element in the piece that is comedically heightened.

○ Example: In Wendi Aarons’ classic McSweeney’s piece, “Airplane Passengers as Explained By Their Pants,” the premise is: you can infer funny things about an airline passenger’s behavior or character from their pants. This is the unusual, funny thing being heightened.

○ Example 2: In Jack Handey’s New Yorker piece, “Job Rejection,” the premise is that a crazy person repeatedly rejects a single job applicant with a series of over-the-top rejection letters. Handey heightens these rejections to make the piece funnier and funnier.

● **POV (Narrator or Character):** The Point-Of-View is the narrator’s central opinion or perspective in the piece. The POV is typically unusual or surprising in a way that drives the comedy.

○ Example: “It’s Decorative Gourd Season Motherfucker” is a great example of a strong, unusual, and very funny POV.

● **POV (Author):** In a satire piece especially, the author’s point-of-view is often the opposite of the narrator’s Point-Of-View. This is a common tool in satire: use hyperbole to argue for the opposite of what you actually believe. The Author’s POV is the subtext of that piece; it answers the question: “what is this piece really saying?”

○ Example: In the classic Onion piece, “Pitchfork Gives Music 6.8″, although the narrator is reporting flatly on a fake Pitchfork review that rates all music as mediocre, the satirical POV is that hipster music reviews like Pitchfork are a bit pretentious, showboaty, and kind of suck the joy out of music.

● **Heightening:** Good humor usually heightens. Mediocre humor often fails to heighten. Here’s a nice explanation from humorist Mike Lacher:

○ “To me, heightening is expanding your premise in new and surprising ways that still connect coherently to what you’ve set up earlier. It’s walking that balance of finding new territory while not jumping so far ahead that it feels contrived. In terms of humor writing, you usually see this in terms of ‘the jokes getting funnier.’
But I think that feeling is less about the fact that the author saved the best jokes for last, and rather than they’ve carefully expanded the premise step by step in more surprising ways. That feeling of surprise makes it feel ‘funnier.’” - Mike Lacher. That’s an excerpt from Mike Lacher’s interview on Hyoom. Read the whole thing!

- **Funny Filters - from** “How to Write Funny” by Scott Dikkers. According to The Onion founder Scott Dikkers, all humor uses at least one of these 11 “funny filters”:
  - Irony: When the literal meaning is the opposite of the intended meaning.
  - Character: When a comedic character acts out her clearly defined traits, a joke happens.
  - Shock: “Sex, swearing, violence, and gross-out… Anything that’s impolite in mixed company.”
  - Hyperbole: “Exaggeration plus”
  - Wordplay: Broadly speaking, “any kind of fun you can have with words.”
  - Reference: Relatable observation--“readers have seen, heard, or experienced what the author is describing.”
  - Madcap: Absurdism, non-sequiturs, and crazy, made words and descriptions
  - Parody: Poking fun at some other entertainment product--movie, TV show, book, magazine, website, etc.
  - Analogy: Finding similarities between two very different things.
  - Misplaced Focus: When the writer intentionally focuses on the wrong thing or something that shouldn’t matter.
  - Metahumor: Using humor itself, or the idea of humor, as a comedic target.

- **Basic Humor Principles - According to the Gotham Humor Writing course:**
  - **Exaggeration:** Using “blown up” statements that aren’t meant to be taken literally. One of the simplest, most common humor techniques.
  - **Juxtaposition:** Combining two unexpected and different people, situations, or entities, for comedic effect.
  - **Shock/Surprise,** e.g. The “audacious single-mindedness” of character Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel Lolita.
  - **Extreme Situations,** e.g. In T. C. Boyle’s short story “The Ape Lady in Retirement,” a man takes an ape-researcher and a chimpanzee up in his small airplane and funny antics ensue.
○ **Sound/Rhythm/Wordplay**: Some words, and sentence constructions, just sound funnier than others.
○ **Irony**: When the literal meaning doesn’t match the underlying meaning
○ **Attitude**: Some narrators or characters simply have a funny outlook. (This one feels a bit circular, but you can see what they’re getting at.)

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**Some Features of Good Short Humor Writing**

Here are some commonalities I’ve noticed across good humor writing. These are generalizations, not laws of comedy physics written on stone tablets. There are exceptions.

1. **The premise is clear**: The reader is easily able to say, “I get what’s funny about this.” This doesn’t mean that the reader necessarily picks up on every bit of subtext in the piece, or that all readers react in the same way. It simply means that the piece wears the funny thing on its sleeve.

2. **The premise is obvious from early on**: The reader understands the comedic premise from very early in the piece, often from the piece title alone, or within the first paragraph. Pieces that don’t grab a reader early on usually feel much less funny.

3. **The piece heightens**: Humor is driven by surprise. Heightening is, in effect, driving the piece to newer, more surprising places.

4. **The premise is original**. If the topic and execution of a humor piece feels too familiar, too similar to other stuff that’s out there, then it’s usually much less funny.
   ○ “I’ve already seen this” = Not that funny.

5. **The jokes are original**. Again, because humor thrives on surprise, originality, and subversion of expectations, it’s best to avoid humor cliches and jokes that have already been made before. Unoriginal jokes make a piece feel stale, boring, cheap.

6. **There is a strong, unusual point-of-view**. 100% hells-to-the-yes!
Online Humor Writing Classes

1. **Skillshare - Humor Writing: Write Funny for the Internet**, taught by Mike Lacher.
   ○ This is a very short “class” on writing a short humor piece. It’s only about 1 hr. worth of video. If you just want a fun primer on some basics, from one of the best humor writers, this class is perfect.

2. **Second City - Satire Writing for the Internet**
   ○ These classes focus heavily on McSweeney’s and Shouts and Murmurs style short satire pieces. But although focused on satire, there’s a strong overlap with humor more generally.
   ○ The class was designed (and many of the sections are taught) by writer and author [Caitlin Kunkel](http://caitlinkunkel.com).
   ○ This class has excellent peer and instructor feedback. If you want to write short satire and publish in McSweeney’s and the like, or if you just want to up your short humor game, this is the best class I’ve found.

3. **Gotham Writers - Humor Writing Online**
   ○ Based in NYC, Gotham is one of the biggest online writing schools. They have a solid reputation and good teachers.
   ○ This class focuses on humor writing broadly, especially humorous fiction and personal essays. If you want a general exposure to humor writing, I think you’ll enjoy this class. I did.

Writing Books

Humor/Comedy Writing Books

1. **How to Write Funny** (Part 1) by Scott Dikkers
   ○ The founder of The Onion teaches funny writing in a concise and compelling volume. Excellent! If you read one humor writing book, make it this.
   ○ **How to Write Funnier** (Part 2) is the second in the series. It goes deeper. Deep is good.

2. **Poking a Dead Frog: Conversations with Today’s Top Comedy Writers** by Mike Sacks
Mike Sacks, a hilarious humor writer, interviews dozens of the best comedy writers. This is less of a “how to” book (though there is a little of that) and more of a fascinating and inspiring look into the heads of a bunch of great funny writers. Recommended!

3. **Comedy Writing Secrets** by Mark Shatz and Mel Helitzer.
   - One of the more popular comedy writing books. This book both explains some comedy fundamentals and delves into a number of types of comedic writing. I didn’t get as much from this one as I did from Scott Dikkers’ or Mike Sacks’ books, and it can get a bit cheesy at times. But there are a few good parts. Your mileage may vary.

4. **The Hidden Tools of Comedy** by Steve Kaplan
   - A popular comedy writing book by “Hollywood script doctor” Steve Kaplan. This one focuses more on screenwriting.

General Writing Books

There are billions of writing books. Here are some favorites that helped me with humor writing.

1. **On Becoming a Writer** by Dorothea Brande
   - A classic. A great dive into the psychology of writing and how to find a writing process. The description of free-writing to generate ideas (“morning pages” as Brande calls them) is 100% relevant for generating comedic ideas.

2. **Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies** by Roy Peter Clark
   - 55 mini-essays on craft, ranging from sentence mechanics and grammar, all the way to advice on undertaking large writing projects. Just a great, useful, all-killer-no-filler writing book.

3. **How to Write Short: Word Craft for Fast Times** by Roy Peter Clark
   - Here Clark focuses on short pieces (though not necessarily funny ones). Worth a read if you are writing short humor!

4. **Zen in the Art of Writing** by Ray Bradbury
○ An inspiring and fun collection. Full of great quotations, e.g. “I have never listened to anyone who criticized my taste in space travel, sideshows or gorillas. When this occurs, I pack up my dinosaurs and leave the room.”

5. **The War of Art** and **Turning Pro** by Steven Pressfield
   ○ When I meet people who’ve read Pressfield, they either love or hate these books. I love them, and these are his two best.

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### Other Great Resources

1. **How to Write Funny** - Onion founder and long-time editor-in-chief Scott Dikkers has a website, newsletter, and podcast - all dedicated to making you a funnier writer.

2. **The Newsletter of Humorous Writing** - A round-up of the best humor writing of the week, by Brian Agler, Luke Burns, and James Folta. These guys are the power trio of finding online humor gems.

3. **Caitlin Kunkel’s Satire Newsletter** - A relatively infrequent but value-packed newsletter (a combo that I appreciate) from humor writer, author, and Second City satire writing teacher Caitlin Kunkel. Get the inside scoop in the humor writing world.

4. **Doin’ It With Mike Sacks** - An excellent comedy writing podcast from the best interviewer around, Mike Sacks. What exactly does Mike mean by “Doin’ It”? I’m not sure, but I think I like it.

5. **Hyoom Newsletter** - A monthly newsletter by yours truly. My best humor writing, plus essays and interviews with amazing writers. If you came across this cheat sheet but aren’t on my special list, by god, **what are you waiting for??**

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### Goodbye

Hope you liked this cheat sheet. Feedback? Compliments? Money? These things are most welcome: **alex@hyoom.com**