

Habits of the Comic Mind

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Becoming a professional stand up comedian is the result of years of dedication to the craft of comedy and the art of being funny. On this journey, funny people develop a series of mental habits that help them to continuously find humor in things. For most comics, these habits of the comic mind are unconscious because they're just part of the way they make people laugh.

My aim in this article is to bring several of these habits to conscious awareness so anyone can learn and practice them at will. Some may be familiar because you already do them, while others may be unfamiliar because they're not your regular habits. Apply all of them as they will enhance your ability to be funny.

Here are some of the habits of comic mind:

Comic Mind Habit 1: Notice What Others Miss

When you hear a familiar phrase but you have no idea what it means, learn its meaning and origin. Begin with these phrases: "Down to the bitter end." "Blown to smithereens." "It's the real McCoy." You may know their implied meanings, but do you know their actual meanings and origins? The average person doesn't care. Care.

Do you know what etymology means?

Comic Mind Habit 2: Find the Contradictions

There are so many little things that make no sense if you look at them for what they really are. For instance, George Carlin's joke "Dogs hate it when you blow in their face. But put them in the car and they stick their heads out the window." Jon Stewart on the Daily Show often presents news personalities contradicting their own opinions from one day to the next. Unfunny folks don't find the paradoxes in things. Find.

Do you know why Kamikaze pilots wore helmets?

Comic Mind Habit 3: Sort for Assumptions and Mess with Them

Assumptions constitute the foundation of joke structure as the mechanism of misdirection. Without an assumption there can be no misdirect; and without misdirection there can be no surprise. Get in the habit of noticing what assumptions others make, and then give an unexpected alternative. Jokes come from shattering assumptions. Shatter.

Have you ever eaten dinner holding your utensils backwards?

Comic Mind Habit 4: Be Aware Of the Details

Every day, in your environment, you're bombarded by millions of details you need to pay attention to. The jokes are in the details. Seemingly irrelevant pieces of information you experience everyday can be fodder for jokes. Comedians note those insignificant details that others can't be bothered with. Bother.

What is the function of a blue reflector in the middle of the road?

Comic Mind Habit 5: Investigate Things You Dislike

Comedians talk about things they think are wrong. Know thy enemy. Everything you find upsetting is a potential premise for material. Instead of avoiding unpleasant situations, you need to actively seek them. Accept jury duty. Help someone move. Purchase a David Hasselhoff album. Others don't do what they don't want to do. Do.

Have you ever sat and talked with a homeless person?

Comic Mind Habit 6: Know the Latest Trends

If you're familiar with the "tipping point" concept, then you understand how trends come about. Comics often recognize a social development and talk about it before it becomes a fully accepted trend. Play poker. Smoke a cigar. Date online. Are you the first to know or the last to know? Know.

Do you know what managing data on the cloud means?

Comic Mind Habit 7: Pay Attention to History

If you're like me, you hated history classes in school because it had nothing to do with today. How wrong I was. History is filled with well-known ideas waiting for your comedic spin. Famous comedians often use historical events as metaphors in their material. Most uncreative people

don't study history. Study.

Do you understand the significance of the French Revolution?

Comic Mind Habit 8: Be Playfully Contrary

Disagree even when you agree. This can quickly get irritating, so do so with some discretion...or not. Pissing people off can really teach you how much others care about their opinions and beliefs. If you're a theist, be an atheist in conversation. Dislike chocolate. Become the meat police. The average Joe avoids confrontation. Confront.

Have you ever argued for the opposite side of your political views?

Comic Mind Habit 9: Notice Recurring Themes of Pop Culture

TV covers them daily. Exploit these trends before they become passé. Are you familiar with all the products for depression, ED, feminine pads, bad breath, dry skin, sore feet, etc.? Have you noticed the themed stories on the news, like pit bull attacks, green technology, autistic savants playing music? Many people are not open to the latest thing. Open.

Do you which city in America is the fattest?

Comic Mind Habit 10: Know How to Research Anything

When you discover you don't know something, you should have a way of finding out. The easiest way is to just ask. Whenever someone uses a word I don't know, I always ask what it means. You need to be able to go to a book, computer or smart phone to quickly research the details of the things you don't know, so later you can talk about them. Not everyone is prepared to know. Prepare.

Do you visit Wikipedia on a regular basis?

Comic Mind Habit 11: Sit Somewhere and Pay Attention

You need to become aware of the world around you. Go to your favorite place, and then sit and be quiet. Use all of your senses. Look, listen, smell, feel and taste if appropriate. You'll notice so many things you've taken for granted or ignored for years. The world is an amazingly diverse place filled with infinite possibilities. There are realms the average person never notices. Notice.

Have you ever shut your eyes and taken a walk?

Comic Mind Habit 12: Study Comedy History

Comics mostly only study the current comics. There's so much classic comedy available on video and the Internet. Too many of the people in my classes aren't familiar with the works of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, the Marx Bros., May West, W.C. Fields, Abbot and Costello, Jack Benny, Jacques Tati, Jerry Lewis, Peter Sellers, Sid Caesar, Red Skelton, not to mention Richard Pryor, Lenny Bruce and Shelly Berman. I've not even mentioned the great English Music Hall clowns, Shakespearian fools and Vaudeville character comedians who are the predecessors of all the funny people we enjoy today. Many comics today are unacquainted with the comedians of the past. Acquaint.

Do you know what Comedia del Arte is?

Comic Mind Habit 13: Have a Daily Habit of Study

Learn a little bit every day. If you don't have time to read, then put an atlas, encyclopedia, magazine or newsletter by your toilet. Study them for those few uninterrupted minutes. I've learned more on the toilet than I ever did in the classroom. It's unfortunate that after high school, most people don't ever read another book. Most people have learned how to stop learning. Learn.

Do you have an opinion about who was the smartest person to ever live?

These habits are some of the reasons great comedians seem versed in everything, whereas the average person is living their head...and it's sublet. Great comedians care, find, shatter, bother, do, know, study, confront, open, prepare, notice, acquaint and learn to develop a comic mind. Practicing these mental habits daily, like good musicians practice scales, will expand the range and increase the virtuosity of your comedy.