

centration, and raise the level of your confidence. This makes it possible to attend to the next task at hand, the next joke or paragraph or drawing or audition or whatever.

This war is won in small battles. And the task-at-hand tool relies heavily on the difficult delusion that the outside world somehow doesn't exist. Now, you know and I know that that's not true. At the end of the day, when the jokes are all written, the cartoons all drawn, what-have-you, there are still bills to pay, and transmissions to fix, and crying babies in the neighborhood, and vanishing rain forests, and that nagging unresolved question of whether Leno is better than Letterman or not.

But none of that matters when you're in the zone.

When you're concentrating on the task at hand, the outside world truly does not exist. You get in a lick of good work, pat yourself on the back for that lick of good work, then, taking that win, press on to the next piece of work, better equipped than ever to win. Thus do the tools complement one another. Thus does the snake swallow its own tail.

Soon we'll be moving on to the concrete tools of comedy, the nuts-'n'-bolts structural stuff you probably bought this book for in the first place. You may think that those tools are the only ones that matter. You may think that I've wasted a lot of time and a lot of words to create an emotional environment in which those tools can be used without unhelpful expectations, positive, negative, or otherwise. Would it make you feel better to know that I'm getting paid by the word? That's the joke answer. The real answer is this: *Without the proper emotional grounding, the tools themselves are useless.*

Unless you first make a commitment to fight the fears which inhibit creativity, you won't be funny at all. You will have wasted your money on this book, except for perhaps a buck you'll recoup at some yard sale some day.

In sum, then, pitching forward on your face is not a bad thing, but a good thing. At least in *falling* forward you're *moving* forward, and moving forward is all that really matters. Remember that stairs get climbed one step at a time.

Now that we're all so giddily un-results-oriented, let's look at how we can get some damn fine results out of our toolbox. In other words, enough yakking, here comes the hardware . . .

3

THE COMIC PREMISE

The comic premise is the gap between comic reality and real reality.

Any time you have a comic voice or character or world or attitude that looks at things from a skewed point of view, you have a gap between realities. Comedy lives in this gap.

The comic premise in, for example, *Back to the Future* is the gap between the comic reality of that movie's 1950s world and the "real" reality of Marty McFly. To him, Ronald Reagan is President of the United States; to people living in the 1950s, Reagan's just a hack actor. That joke is typical of the film and reflects its comic premise.

In *Catch-22*, you can see the comic premise in the gap between Yossarian's world view, "I'm sane, but I want to be crazy," and everyone else's world view, "We're crazy, but pretend to be sane."

In the comic strip *Peanuts*, to take a wildly different example, there's a gap between Snoopy's "real" reality—he's a dog—and his comic reality—he's a World War I flying ace. You don't have to look at movies or books or even comic strips to find the gap of the comic premise. It's right down there at the level of the joke, the gag, the funny line.

"I haven't had sex in a year."

"Celebrate?"

"No, married."

The gap here is the difference between a real-world reason—

celibacy—and a comic-world reason—marriage—for not having had sex.

The comic premise exists in all comic structures, no matter how large or small. Even the lowly pun is a function of the gap between the “real” reality of the way you expect a certain word to behave and the comic reality of the way it ends up behaving in the joke.

A man walked up to me and said, “I haven’t had a bite in a week.” So I bit him.

We expect the word “bite” to refer to food. That’s the real reality. But when it suddenly refers to aggressive behavior instead, it twists into comic reality. That’s the gap. See the gap. Be the gap. Use the Force, Luke.

The television series *Mork and Mindy* established the gap between the “real” reality of Mindy’s world and the comic reality of Mork’s. In *The Wonder Years*, it’s the presence of a narrator, an adult looking back at his childhood, that motors the humor of that show. The gap here is between what a child knows and what an adult has learned from experience.

Can you find the comic premise in greeting cards? You bet your dollar forty-nine you can. Consider the following:

*“A birthday toast to your best year ever!”
and then you open the card . . .
“1976, wasn’t it?”*

Here the gap opens between the recipient’s real reality, expectation of good wishes, and the sender’s comic reality, an irony instead.

James Thurber’s writings, to take a more high-school literature tack, often describe the gap, literally, between reality and fantasy, particularly a given character’s comic fantasy interpretation of the reality around him. What’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” if not a cruise along the gap between Mitty’s inner world and the outer world he refuses to acknowledge?

Even titles can express a comic premise. Suppose you encoun-

tered a mystery novel entitled *Spensley Cruntchwhistle, Private Eye*. Would you not expect this book to be a comic mystery or perhaps a children’s book? If yes, it’s because of the gap between real reality (serious novels, serious titles) and comic reality (a detective with a joke name).

Now you may think that this is a little over-analytical, but bear with me. Once you recognize the gap of the comic premise, you’ll start to see it in every funny situation that crosses your path. And once you start to see it in everyday situations, you’ll begin to reverse the process, not just seeing it in experienced situations but *investing it* in comic situations of your own construction. That’s when the comic premise stops being a self-indulgent mental exercise and starts behaving like a tool.

Okay, so let’s do it. Let’s use the comic premise as a tool to create comic situations. In fact, we’ll do it twice: once right now and again later in the chapter after we’ve broken the comic premise into its component parts. Down the left side of the page, write ten real realities. Then, down the right side of the page, write ten comic realities that conflict with them. Before you begin, remember that it’s the process not the product that matters. You won’t be graded, it won’t go on your permanent record, and neatness doesn’t count. In fact, all that really counts is getting the dang thing done as quickly as possible so we can push on. I’ll do a few to get you started.

going to the store	shopping for Uzis
a cop stops a pickup truck	it’s full of space aliens
the Magna Carta	written by e.e. cummings

Right away, we start looking for something unexpected to create the comic reality. In fact, one way to solve this problem is just

to think about what is expected and then insert the opposite.

going to church	in the nude
high-school shop class	taught by Albert Einstein
listening to a symphony	dancing to a symphony

If you found this exercise easy, it's probably because you just let yourself go and allowed your flights of fancy to carry you away. Surprisingly, if you found the exercise tough, it may be because you didn't have quite enough structure around which to organize your thoughts.

The unstructured mind asks, "What's funny?" and instantly gets lost in a mass of amorphous goo. The somewhat structured mind focuses on this thing called the comic premise and tries to get led by some magic hand to some creative end. Less amorphous, but still goo. The more we structure the task, the more we convert the act of creation to the act of asking and answering simple questions, the easier the whole thing gets.

Within the comic premise, there's not just one gap between real reality and comic reality, but all sorts of different gaps. They all turn on conflict, and the deeper the conflict gets, the more interesting the premise becomes.

THREE TYPES OF COMIC CONFLICT

In classic dramatic structure, there are three types of conflict: man against nature, man against man, and man against self. Since comic conflict is often just dramatic conflict with laughs attached, it will come as no huge surprise that these three levels of conflict exist in comic structure, too. You'll find your comic premise on one, two, or all three levels of conflict.

The first type of comic conflict, so-called *global conflict*, is the conflict between people and their world. The conflict can be that of a normal character in a comic world or of a comic character in a normal world. Simple? Pedantic? Just wait!

A normal character in a comic world stands in for the reader or viewer or listener and represents real reality. The situation he finds himself in represents the comic reality. In *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly is a normal character in a comic world. Same with *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Same with the cartoon character Ziggy. Same with Bill Cosby when he introduces us to his quirky friends, Fat Albert, Old Weird Harold, etc.

A comic character in a normal world, on the other hand, carries the comic premise with him. In *Tootsie*, when Michael Dorsey becomes Dorothy Michaels, he turns into a comic character. His world hasn't changed; his own act of transformation has created the comic premise.

When Robin Williams does stand-up comedy, he creates his humor by looking at the straight world in a bent way. Contrast this with Cosby, who looks at a bent world in a straight way. This is the difference between a comic character in a normal world and a normal character in a comic world.

Global conflict is often social conflict; that is, it pits an individual against a whole social structure. In *Stripes*, it's Bill Murray against the US Army. In *The Phil Silvers Show*, it's Sergeant Bilko against the US Army. In *Private Benjamin*, it's Goldie Hawn against the US Army. Does one get the impression that the US Army gets picked on? Well, they've been picking on us for years. In *Beverly Hills Cop*, it's Eddie Murphy versus the social elite. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, it's Jimmy Stewart versus politics-as-usual. This is global conflict.

So looking back at our last exercise, we can now refine it as follows: Create a comic situation that finds its premise in global conflict. You create a normal character, a businessman, say, and then you create a social structure against which to pit him. *Et voilà*: the IRS audit from hell.

Or reverse it. Let the IRS audit office be the normal world now, and let the comic character be one insanely belligerent (or insanely naive, or insanely stupid, or insanely anything) auditee. Later, we'll

discuss how to get more punch out of these situations; for now, it's enough to know that this sort of conflict exists.

Create a few new comic premises built entirely on global conflict and see if the task isn't easier now that you've narrowed the focus. My money is on yes.

- A bumbling scientist is at odds with a chemical firm
- A renegade rock star turns against the music establishment
- An average joe fights city hall
- A town tackles an alien invasion
- A teacher takes on the school board
- A school falls prey to a quirky new principal

Notice that these conflicts aren't necessarily comic. That's okay. In a few chapters we'll have all the tools we need to turn any conflict into a comic one. For now, let's move on to the second type of conflict, *interpersonal* or *local conflict*, battles between individuals.

There are two types of local conflicts. One pits a comic character against a normal character, and the other finds comic characters in opposition. In both cases, the conflict is between people who have an emotional bond. They care about each other. This doesn't mean that they love each other, or even like each other. They may hate each other, but they clearly care. That's what separates this sort of conflict from the conflict between, say, a cop and a con artist. Like the ads say, "This time it's personal."

Mork and Mindy are perfect examples of a comic character versus a normal character. Mork's is the comic reality while Mindy's is real. The gap between their personalities is the comic premise of the show.

Felix and Oscar in *The Odd Couple*, on the other hand, are comic characters in opposition. Each has a strong comic reality, and these comic realities clash hard. This will be made clearer in

the next chapter when we talk about comic characters and their strong comic perspectives.

It's nice when things fit into categories, but what about when things don't fit into categories? What about *What About Bob?* In this film, Richard Dreyfuss is a world-class shrink, and Bill Murray is a world-class loon. Normal character versus comic character, or comic characters in opposition? Who knows? More to the point, who cares?

The tool we're using here is called *classification*. It's a useful but tricky tool. Putting things into categories often helps one see the things more clearly . . . but push everything into pigeonholes and in the end all you get are squished pigeons. If a story or a show or a situation defies easy classification, don't sweat it. As we'll discover soon, the best comedy crosses lines of definition.

Let's tackle our comic premise exercise again, only this time create comic premises built on a comic character versus a normal character, and on comic characters in opposition. Our IRS example won't work now because that's a character versus a world, and the emotional investment is nil. But make the IRS agent the ex-wife of the businessman and you've got juicy local conflict.

- A normal guy deals with a crazy neighbor
- A soldier and a pacifist go to war
- An astronomer marries an astrologer
- A conservative father battles a liberal son
- A wild genius poses problems for her tutor
- A prude and a pimp join forces

Notice once again how much easier it is to make choices when you have more precise questions to ask. Start with the question, "What's a comic premise?" and you founder. But start with, "What's a conflict between a normal character and a comic character?" and you're already into specifics. You're moving toward detail.

Throughout this book, we'll make every effort to move from the general to the specific. Life is better there.

Not just in comedy but in all storytelling, the richest conflict is the conflict within. Sure, we have a passing interest in how Herman Munster fares on jury duty, and yes, we're vaguely curious about Felix and Oscar and that scratch in the dining-room table, but for true dramatic drive, nothing beats seeing characters at war with themselves.

In one sort of *inner conflict*, a normal character becomes a comic character, and the comedy is rooted in the character's change of state. In *Tootsie*, Michael Dorsey starts out as a man and becomes a woman. He's a normal character as a man and a comic character as a woman. The movie turns on the conflict between his normal and his comic selves. Likewise, the Tom Hanks character in *Big*. He starts off normal—a kid—and becomes comic—a kid in an adult's body.

It's also possible to have a comic character at war with himself without his undergoing a change of state. Murphy Brown is a creature filled with doubt. Her doubt was with her long before we met her, and it will be with her long after we're gone. That's inner conflict.

So to couch the comic premise in terms of inner conflict, we might explore the story of a sighted man who goes blind, or that of a blind guy who won't admit that he can't see.

It's easiest to view inner conflict in terms of a normal character who undergoes a comic transformation. And you can make this happen by taking any character and turning him into his opposite. Man into woman, child into adult, idiot into genius, etc.

- A kid becomes a CEO
- A housewife becomes a NATO commander
- The President of Paraguay becomes a boxboy at the A&P
- A classical pianist becomes a rock goddess
- A prince turns into a frog
- A gnome becomes a fashion model
- A football player becomes a ballet star

The really interesting thing about these three types of conflict is how they connect and interleave. In the best comic storytelling, all three types are present in the same situation. When Walter Mitty disappears into fantasy, he is a comic character in a normal world, but he also has conflict with loved ones, and he has conflict within himself over the role he plays.

Or to take another example, in the movie *Trading Places*, Dan Aykroyd and Eddie Murphy do a prince-and-pauper number and become each other. They have global conflict—each struggles to survive in his new and challenging world. They also have local conflict with one another and with the people around them, people they love or hate or rage against or fear. Plus, they each have inner conflict, the struggle of a normal character who has, by transformation, become a comic character and struggles to come to terms with his new persona.

In your comic premises, you should strive for situations that exploit all three types of comic conflict. These situations will reliably be the most richly rewarding comic earth you till. If you aren't sold on my examples, simply take a moment to think of your favorite stand-up comics or movies or television shows or books or cartoons. Don't you enjoy the complex ones more than the simple ones?

In *Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin has global conflict (teachers, parents, space aliens, and other authority figures), and local conflict (Hobbes), and inner conflict (uncontrollable flights of fancy). Nancy and Sluggo, on the other hand, battle the world and each other, but they never battle themselves. Which is the more interesting strip?

A stand-up comic might do a routine about bad airplane food, and it might be very funny. But if she makes it so that the flight attendant is an old enemy who's trying to poison her, and paints herself as a horrible acrophobe who never should have flown in the first place, then the material, so to speak, can really take off.

Try this exercise: Imagine that you've been given the chance to draw a comic strip for a national syndicate. (Can't draw? Never mind; neither can I, but let's pretend, shall we?) Attack this problem in terms of the comic premise: What sorts of comic conflict would make for fun comic strips?

A long-suffering schoolteacher copes with her holy terrors
Newlyweds struggle with in-laws, each other, and
themselves

A boy has a pot-bellied pig for a pet

A quick-witted sheriff runs a county jail

A single mother and her teenage daughters can't get along

A typical suburban family moves to a space station

A cartoonist can't keep his characters from coming to life

You may have noticed that I try to keep my comic premises short, the length of a sentence or less. Like they say, brevity is the soul of wit; more to the point, it's the soul of understanding. If you can't boil your comic premise down to a single line, the chances are that you don't quite have a handle on it yet. Move toward simplicity; if nothing else, it means less work for you when you're using the rule of nine to separate the wheat from the voluminous chaff.

One final thought before we continue: The comic premise not only creates comedy, it also casts the light of truth on a given situation. Specifically, the comic reality reveals the truth in the "real" reality. When Snoopy pretends he's a World War I flying ace, he's revealing an essential truth: *people pretend*. Going back to our notion of truth and pain, look to your normal characters to reveal the meaning of your comic premise, and look to your comic characters to reveal its humor. When Dustin Hoffman rips off his wig at the end of *Tootsie*, the comic character (Dorothy) gets the laughs, but the normal character (Michael) demonstrates the truth and pain: Men and women behave badly toward one another—unless they learn.

To recap: The comic premise is the gap between real reality and comic reality. Every form of humor, from the smallest joke to the largest comic tale, has some sort of defining gap or comic conflict. There are three types of comic conflict: Global conflict

takes place between an individual and his world. Local conflict is about people fighting people; you always hurt the one you love. Inner conflict features a character at war with himself. Inner conflict is always the richest and most rewarding. Just ask Hamlet, or any other comic character.

Oh, you don't buy Hamlet as a comic character? Well, maybe I can change your mind . . .