

## COMIC CHARACTERS

You know what a comic character is, right? That guy sitting behind you at the baseball game who, after six or seven beers, feels he has a personal, adversarial relationship with the umpire or the manager or the visiting pitcher, and a divinely ordained right to share the intimacies of these relationships at the top of his lungs with everyone around him. This person is a comic character right up until the moment he spills a cold beer down your back. Then he's just a jerk.

Okay, seriously, when I say "comic character," who springs to your mind? Lucille Ball, Groucho Marx, Charlie Chaplin, Charlie Brown, Lily Tomlin, Johnny Carson, Ziggy, Bart Simpson, Joel Fleischman, Bertie Wooster, Jonathan Winters, Robin Williams, Sissy Hanksaw, Dave Barry, etc., etc. In truth, you can't swing a dead cat in popular culture without hitting an authentic comic character. Which does you not much good in creating your own comic characters, does it?

Fear not. As your faithful comic alchemist, I have found a formula for creating comic characters. It's not quite as elegant as spinning gold from dross, but a darn sight more reliable. By the end of this chapter, you'll be able to build comic characters of your own, from scratch, in about two minutes flat. In Frankensteinian fashion, you'll have created a monster.

Not all of your comic characters will be "keepers," solid, memorable creations that can stand the weight of major development. But you know me, ol' Johnny Rule-of-Nine. In my universe, it's necessary to create lots and lots and lots of comic characters before I can be confident of having a chosen few who show real

quality and promise. So what I'm after for my own creative purposes—and what I'd like to share with you now—is a comic assembly line, if you will, that can churn out bunches of comic characters. Then we'll set 'em loose and see which ones perform.

Four elements go into the construction of a comic character. The first and most important is the comic perspective.

## THE COMIC PERSPECTIVE

*Show me a comic character without a comic perspective and I'll show you a straight man.*

The heart and soul of any comic character is his STRONG COMIC PERSPECTIVE. I repeat these words—STRONG COMIC PERSPECTIVE—and capitalize them because they may be the three most important words in this book. Every comic character begins and ends with his strong comic perspective. Know this one thing about your characters and you'll know what makes them consistently and reliably funny forever.

The comic perspective is a character's unique way of looking at his world, which differs in a clear and substantial way from the "normal" world view. In the last chapter, I talked about the comic premise as the gap between real reality and comic reality. In a sense, the comic perspective is a character's own individual comic premise. The comic perspective functions in a character exactly as the comic premise functions in a story: It defines the gap that the laughs will spark across.

Gracie Allen's comic perspective was innocence. It was the filter through which she looked at the world, and through which her humor flowed. Harpo Marx's comic perspective was playful-ness. Groucho's, on the other hand, was, shall we say, leering cynicism. In *Northern Exposure*, Joel Fleischman's comic perspective is, basically, "New York rules, Alaska bites." Can you see that every funny thing that happens to him on that show is a function of his comic perspective?

Jerry Lewis, in his movie heyday, had a bumbler's perspective. He acted clumsy but, more importantly, *thought* clumsy. Jack Benny's comic perspective was *tightwad*. (Tightwadishness?

Tightwadidity? The noun escapes me.) The classic Jack Benny bit has a robber telling Jack, "Your money or your life." When Jack answers, "I'm thinking . . ." he's filtering the robber's threat through his strong comic perspective. The possibility that Jack might value his life less than his money is what creates the laugh. And it's his comic perspective that brings that possibility to life.

A character's strong comic perspective is the motor that drives his comic engine. Comedy flows from character, which really means that comedy flows from a character's unique, quirky, off-beat way of looking at the world. When I see a great stand-up comic, what I admire most is his or her ability to take the ordinary details of everyone's life and see them in a new and different light. Jerry Seinfeld has a knack for magnifying the minutiae of modern life; Jimmy Durante looked at the world through nose-colored glasses.

Notice that I speak of a *strong* comic perspective. You will find in creating your own comic perspectives (which you'll be doing in about thirty seconds from now) that the stronger they are, the funnier they are. It's a direct mathematical function. You could graph it.

Okay, so now we have a new tool called *comic perspective*. Let's put it to work by generating ten strong ones. I'll go first.

- virginal schoolboy
- newborn baby
- curmudgeonly oldster
- hard-luck loser
- space alien
- cockeyed optimist
- testosterone poisoning
- canny politician
- perfectly paranoid
- know-it-some

Each of these is a single, clearly defined way of looking at the world. A virginal schoolboy, for example, would see a woman's naked breast as the bridge to manhood, while a newborn baby would see the same breast as . . . lunch! The know-it-some will tell you that the submarine sandwich was invented by the Earl of Submarine; the perfectly paranoid person will wonder if it's poisoned. Virtually anything can be filtered through a comic perspective, and virtually any point of view can be a comic perspective. Give it a go.

It's likely that you don't love all your perspectives. Some of them may seem flat, dull, unpromising. Why is this? If you examine your list, I think you'll find that the boring comic perspectives are the ones that travel the least distance from commonly held perspectives. A priest's perspective, for example, is not inherently funny. Something must be done to that perspective, something that pushes it toward some edge and wedges open the gap between what's real and what's funny. That something is *exaggeration*, the tool we'll check out next.

Before we go, though, I'd like you to look briefly at your own creative process. By this point in the voyage, if you're starting to get the hang of using tools, then your ideas should be flowing a little more freely, both as a function of changed expectation, and as a function of finer focus. Notice how the problems we're solving continue to get increasingly smaller. (Bonus points to you who said, "Whoa, check that oxymoron.")

We started out asking, "What's funny?" Then we asked, "What's a funny story?" Then we asked, "What's a comic character in a funny story?" Now we're asking, "What's a comic character's strong comic perspective?" Next we'll ask, "How can we make that strong comic perspective even stronger still?"

## EXAGGERATION

*If you can't be right, be loud.*

The thing about Gracie Allen is not just that she was innocent but that she was the ultimate innocent. No one could possibly be more naive than Gracie. Likewise, no one could possibly be a bigger bumbler than Jerry Lewis (with the possible exception of Peter Sellers' Inspector Clouseau.) There's no confusing Mork's or ALF's alien perspective with anything from around here. They came—literally—from millions of miles away.

The tool of exaggeration, then, simply takes a comic perspective and pushes and stretches and accelerates it until it's sufficiently far from our perspective that it starts to be funny. A priest's perspective isn't necessarily funny, but if you turn him into a perpetual sot, or into the ultimate twinkly-eyed rascal, you start to move him where you want him to go.

This tool, exaggeration, above all else, requires that you be *bold*. We writers tend to think in terms of what's logical, but comedy defies logic. What's dynamic? What's strange? WHAT IS WRIT LARGE? That's what we're going for here. Joel Fleischman is compelling because he's so strongly drawn. It's not that he kinda likes New York and sorta doesn't like Alaska. It's rather that he unreservedly *loves* New York and utterly *loathes* Alaska. Nothing less would do.

The rule, then, is this: Take your comic character's comic perspective to the *end of the line*. When Dudley Moore played a drunk in *Arthur*, he was the drunkest drunk the world had seen (since Falstaff). Woody Allen isn't just neurotic; as a comic character, he's a Freudian field day. I'm beating a dead horse about this, I know, but it's key, so bear with me. Most failed comic characters fail as a function of their limited exaggeration. Would Robin Williams be less interesting and less fun if he were less totally manic? You bet your two-drink minimum he would.

More examples: remember Goldie Hawn in *Laugh-In*? She wasn't just a ditzy airhead, she was the ultimate ditzy airhead. That's what made her funny. Walter Mitty doesn't fantasize about catching a bus on time, he fantasizes saving the world. Thurber took Mitty's comic perspective to the limit. That's what you must do.

You know, I've talked a lot about not being afraid to fail, and I'm going to say it again here: When you attempt to exaggerate a comic character, don't be afraid to fail. Because here's the good news: In this case, you *can't* fail. There's no such thing as exaggerating too much. Isn't that a blessing?

Exaggerating.

Exaggerating.

Exaggerating.

Exaggerating.

Exaggerating.

Too much!

All right, let's try another exercise. This time we want to take a comic perspective and push it to its limit. If your character's comic perspective, for example is, *she likes cats*, then an exaggeration of that would be *feline-obsessed*; has twelve dozen of them. If the comic perspective is *parental disapproval*, the exaggeration is *hates everything kids do, from their music to their food to the little lights they have in their shoes these days*. Let's look at a list.

<b>Comic Perspective</b>	<b>Exaggeration</b>
fearful	jumps at shadows
joyful	all manic all the time
drunk	stewed to the gills
thrill seeker	adrenaline junkie
eccentric collector	accumulation of nose hairs
tone deaf	Roseanne Barr

Tackle this one like those old SAT questions: A is to B as C is to \_\_\_\_.

**Comic Perspective      Exaggeration**

Exaggeration, by the way, is a tool that pays dividends all over the comic world, and we'll come back to it again and again. For now, though, let's look at the third facet of a comic character's construction, something without which no comic character would be complete . . . flaws.

## FLAWS

*What's wrong with this picture?*

A comic character is funny as a function of his flaws. Flaws are failings or negative qualities within a person's attributes or aspects. In *Cheers*, Sam Malone's egomania is a flaw and Diane Chambers' snobishness is a flaw. In P.G. Wodehouse's works, Bertie Wooster's fecklessness is a flaw, and his butler Jeeves's fastidiousness is likewise a flaw. Hamlet's indecision is a flaw. My lack of spelling skills is a fla.

Flaws in a comic character work to open emotional distance between a comic character and viewers or readers so that those viewers or readers can comfortably laugh at, say, someone slipping on a banana peel. Without this emotional distance, the truth and the pain of a situation hit too close to home for an audience to find funny. A thing is only funny if it happens to the other guy, and flaws in a character work to make him "the other guy" in a reader's or viewer's mind. When I freaked out over Leslie Parker in seventh grade, my flaw of indiscretion (and massive stupidity) separated me from my audience (the sadistic weasels) and allowed them to laugh at my discomfort in comfort. Oh joy.

Sometimes flaws are subjective; one man's flaw is another man's social outrage. In the film *A Fish Called Wanda*, the Michael Palin character was a stutterer. To some people that was a comic flaw. To others it was abusive. And unfunny. Remember that a joke always takes place in the context of an audience's expectations. When assigning flaws to your comic characters, you must always keep in mind what your audience will accept, tolerate, or just plain get. Also remember that a physical attribute can be a flaw without being a bad thing. Baldness, shortness, tallness, fatness, skinniness, excessive nose hair . . . these all work to distance the

comic character from the audience: Whoever that guy is, he's nothing like me.

The more flaws you can find for your comic characters, the more interesting and complex and funny those characters will become. Al Bundy on *Married . . . with Children* is sloppy, sexist and selfish. He also has smelly feet and excessive nose hair. Louie DePalma on *Taxi* is venal, corrupt, lecherous, mean-spirited, etc. A comic character, in at least one sense, is the sum of his flaws.

A flaw can also be a positive aspect that's taken too far: Kindness, love, a giving or a trusting nature all turn into flaws when exaggeration makes them abnormal simply by writing them large. Charlie Brown's trusting nature is a flaw because he trusts too much. This lets us laugh when Lucy pulls that football away for the umpteenth zillionth time.

Just as you can build a comic character from his comic perspective outward, so can you with his flaws. Find a flaw and you've found a comic character.

Hey, there's a mind-boggler, huh? *Find a flaw and you've found a comic character.* If this is true, then you could go to a simple list of nouns, pick ones that appeal to you, and use them as little comic launching pads. How hard can it be to find a noun?

Comedy is tools. If you have the right tools, you never have to stumble through the mirror-house of unfocused writing. It's a powerful thought. Perhaps we should all meditate on it for a moment, hmm?

Hmmmmmmmmmm-mmmmmmmmmmm-mmmmmmmmmmm-  
mmmmmmmmmm.

Okay, back to work.

Greed is a flaw; Scrooge is a character. Wild abandon is a flaw; John Belushi is a character. Drunkenness is a flaw; Dean Martin is a character. Laziness is a flaw; Andy Capp is a character. Stubbornness is a flaw; Murphy Brown is a character.

To see this relationship more clearly, take a moment to generate a list of flaws and then extrapolate an appropriate comic character for each one. It should all look something like this:



<b>Flaw</b>	<b>Comic Character</b>
fearfulness	multiphobic wreenie
insecurity	nervous nelly
dementia	psycho killer
envy	covetous co-worker
drug abuse	total stoner
artificial leg	world's worst hurdler
fecklessness	silly uncle
baldness	wannabe sex symbol

It's not quite as easy as one-two-three. To generate this list, you have to go "shopping" in your head for appropriate nouns to put in column one and then find characters to link them to in column two. But isn't it a darn sight easier to think of mere words than to think of whole comic notions? You could even flip through a dictionary. None dare call it cheating.

Also notice that it's not necessary to link flaws to an "appropriate" character. It's logical, for example, to assign prudishness to a schoolmarm, but what if you assign that flaw to a stripper instead? An air-traffic controller? President of the United States? The possibilities are endless.

Sometimes flaws and comic perspective complement one another. Diane Chambers has the strong comic perspective of a drawing-room intellectual and the complementing flaw of snob-bishness. Gracie Allen's comic perspective is innocence, which is a flaw as well. But what you really want is a kind of synergy between flaws and perspective so that some flaws conflict with the perspective while others reinforce it. Lucille Ball's comic perspective, "There's nothing I can't do," is aided by her flaw of impulsiveness, and thwarted by her flaw of incompetence. In the best comic characters, flaws and perspective go to war.

Think about this in terms of inner conflict. When a character is at war with himself, there's a sort of psychic no-man's land be-

tween where he is and where he wants to be. Flaws reflect his true nature; comic perspective is his fantasy self-image. Here, then, is another comic premise you can exploit, the *inner comic premise*, the gap between how a character sees himself and who he really is. This doesn't hold true for all comic characters. Think of it as an angle you can sometimes play.

<b>Fantasy</b>	<b>Reality</b>
war hero	4-F weakening
beauty queen	plain jane
genius	stupid
loved by all	loner

Flaws, then, serve two purposes: They create conflict within characters, and they create emotional distance between character and audience. Having created this distance, oddly, it's now necessary to remove it. That's where humanity comes in, the fourth and final facet of a comic character.

## HUMANITY

*I like him; he's like me.*

We used flaws to drive a wedge between the character and the audience so that the audience could laugh. Now we use humanity to build a bridge between the character and the audience so that the audience can care.

Story-structure gurus will tell you that it's vital for an audience to care. The central character or hero of any successful story, they'll tell you, must arouse in the reader's or the viewer's mind both sympathy and empathy. That is, you're supposed to like the hero, and he's supposed to be like you. If that happens, you engage emotionally with the hero and gladly undertake his quest with him; you care.

The same is true with comic characters, and logically so. After all, if you want to find someone consistently funny for the life of a story, you'd better feel a part of his experience somehow. So what it comes down to is this: In some way, all comic characters have *humanity*. If they don't, we don't care. It's as simple as that. Simple, yes, but why? Remember that comedy is truth and pain so that without some means of connecting a comic character's truth to our own experience, we have no way of knowing what we're supposed to find funny. A character's humanity is the bridge we need. Recall the difference between a class clown and a class nerd. The class clown was funny because his experience was your experience. The class nerd was an object of scorn and derision because he stood apart; you couldn't relate. In the cruel Darwinian quicksand of junior-high school, the nerd had no humanity.

So what is humanity, anyhow? Can we look at a creep like Dan Fielding on *Night Court* and find his humanity? You bet your inflatable rubber love-doll we can. Sure, he's a slime bucket, venal, sexist, corrupt, all of that. But when push comes to shove, he'll do the right thing, even if it means giving up his smarmy goals. That's a classic definition of humanity: He'll do the right thing in a pinch. Louie DePalma has the same humanity. But of course that's not the only kind of humanity.

Look at Otto in *A Fish Called Wanda*. What is his humanity? He's a romantic. He has a romantic soul. We forgive him his flaws, and root for his cause, because secretly he's a romantic, and secretly so are we all.

Here are some comic good guys and their humanity: Charlie Brown is vulnerable. Robin Williams is energetic. Jonathan Winters is a teddy bear. Goldie Hawn is bubbly. Lily Tomlin is insightful. Arnold Schwarzenegger is strong. Hannibal Lecter is charming . . .

Hey, hold on, hang on, Hannibal Lecter is a comic good guy? Hannibal the Cannibal from *Silence of the Lambs*? How could he be a good guy? For that matter, how could he be a comic character at all? Well, let's take a closer look.

Hannibal Lecter's strong comic perspective is "People are food." His flaws include arrogance, malevolence, psychotic behavior, no self-awareness, immorality, amorality, overwhelming evil,

and really bad eating habits. He probably does not floss.

To be a comic character, he'll need a mountain of humanity to counterbalance his flaws. His positive qualities include intelligence, urbanity, poise, wit, good manners, loyalty to his friends, a sense of fair play, self-confidence, and an incredibly strong will to win: He'll stop at nothing to eat your face. Even as we abhor his flaws, his humanity makes us like him and want him to win.

To make Hannibal Lecter work on a comic level, it was necessary first to make him disgusting, make us revile him, and then pile on the humanity to counteract our revulsion. It's almost physics: For every flaw, there is an equal and opposite humanity. The worse you make some aspects of a comic character, the better you must make others.

One of the surest ways to create humanity is to give your comic character an indomitable will. No character is more compelling, more engaging, than the one who will stop at nothing to achieve his goal.

Be careful in assigning humanity. It's not enough to say of a character, "Sure, he's a hit man, but he loves his mother so he's okay." A character's humanity must be a real part of his character. If it's pasted on, you get a cartoon and not a character.

Also be aware that a character's flaw can also be part of his humanity. Lucy's impulsiveness, which always gets her into trouble, also makes us love her more. Mork's innocence creates distance and closeness at the same time.

Humanity, then, is the sum of a character's positive human qualities that inspire either sympathy or empathy or both. A list of such qualities might include:

- loyalty
- honesty
- generosity
- humility
- sense of humor
- curiosity
- vulnerability
- strength of will
- innocence

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patience  
physical strength  
physical beauty

Or, a list of such qualities might include . . .

Now our picture of the comic character is complete: strong comic perspective, flaws, humanity, and exaggeration.

**Comic Perspective** is the unique world-view, at variance with normal reality, that motors the character's comic engine.

**Flaws** are the elements of a comic character that separate him from "real" people. If he has no flaws, he's generic. If he's generic, he's not funny.

**Humanity** is the quality of a comic character that unites him with the audience. Building sympathy and empathy, humanity lets us care.

**Exaggeration** is the force that works on all three—comic perspective, flaws, and humanity—to move a normal character further and further into the comic world. Exaggeration widens the gap upon which the comic premise of the character is built.

Let's look at some famous comic characters now and track their comic perspective, flaws, humanity, and exaggeration.

Groucho Marx is a leering cynic, whose massive  
misanthropy is counteracted by his unbridled  
wry wit.

Sam Malone, that wild egomaniac, is supremely sexist, but  
when he reveals his insecurity, we all fall in love.

Diane Chambers is a hyperintellectual whose  
snobishness is not attractive, but whose  
generosity of spirit is.

Charlie Brown is a perennial loser. His self-pity would  
alienate us were it not for his long-suffering patience.

Bertie Wooster views the world through the prism of privilege. His flaw is his classist attitude, but at least he knows how to accept help when he needs it.

Jerry Lewis is bumbling and incompetent, yet sincere. Hamlet, that wacky Dane, is vengeful and indecisive, yet noble, strong-willed, and loyal to his dad.

It might be useful for you to do a few more on your own. Jack Benny? Charlie Chaplin? Lenny Bruce? The Tin Man? Mike Doonesbury?

You'll notice that it's possible for a comic character to have many comic perspectives, flaws, and human qualities. You want this. You want your comic characters to be interesting, complex, dynamic people full of rich potential for inner conflict, and this only happens when you build their personalities in layers. But for the purposes of simple comic construction, you don't have to go any further than hitting the marks: comic perspective, flaws, humanity, exaggeration.

I promised at the top of the chapter that by the end of it you'd be able to build comic characters with assembly-line speed, if not precision. Try it now. Create some comic characters. Give them names, comic perspectives, flaws, humanity, exaggeration.

As you do this exercise, look for lines of conflict between and among your categories. If you create a character whose comic perspective is fearlessness, for instance, go out of your way to assign phobias as a flaw and a superhero's desire to serve others as a humanity. This dynamic inner conflict will mean that some part of your character must naturally be wrong when everything else is right. Like Hamlet, he'll never be at peace.

To take another example, if your character's comic perspective is "love conquers all," give him selfishness as a flaw and guilelessness as humanity. This synergy will put such a character in a painful box, and a painful box is exactly where you want your comic characters to be.

CHARACTER: Spenley Cruntchwhistle  
COMIC PERSPECTIVE: expert on everything  
FLAWS: know-it-all attitude, massive holes in his  
knowledge  
HUMANITY: well-meaning, sincere, helpful  
EXAGGERATION: knows the seven chief exports  
of Bulgaria

CHARACTER: Ophelia Barnette  
COMIC PERSPECTIVE: body is a temple of the holy spirit  
FLAWS: shyness, smoldering libido  
HUMANITY: loyal to her friends, desperately wants love  
EXAGGERATION: undresses in the dark, even when alone

CHARACTER: Peter the Puppy  
COMIC PERSPECTIVE: born to chew shoes  
FLAWS: curiosity, no bladder control, sharp teeth  
HUMANITY: playful, affectionate, soft and cuddly  
EXAGGERATION: pees every five minutes

CHARACTER:  
COMIC PERSPECTIVE:  
FLAWS:  
HUMANITY:  
EXAGGERATION:

CHARACTER:  
COMIC PERSPECTIVE:  
FLAWS:  
HUMANITY:  
EXAGGERATION:

CHARACTER:  
COMIC PERSPECTIVE:  
FLAWS:  
HUMANITY:  
EXAGGERATION:

CHARACTER:

COMIC PERSPECTIVE:

FLAWS:

HUMANITY:

EXAGGERATION:

People are always asking me how to make a script funny, or a scene, or a story, or even a single line. People stop me in the supermarket. They say, "Hey mister, I can tell just by looking at you what a funny guy you are. How can I be funny, too?" The answer, I tell them as I tell you, is to invent characters, invest them with strong comic perspectives and flaws and humanity, exaggerate those attributes, then turn these creatures loose upon the world. Then I ask them if they know what aisle the peas are on.

If you want to be more consistently funny, start building a library of comic perspectives and start noticing how almost every joke or funny situation you encounter is a function of someone's comic perspective.

*As the husband said to his wife, "I can think for myself—can't I, dear?"*

The husband's strong comic perspective is clear: The decision of the wife is final. His flaws and humanity are implied: He's meek, yet loyal to the woman he loves.

Which raises an interesting question: What is your strong comic perspective? How do you look at the world in a way that is unique, exaggerated, and at far variance from normal reality?

The first time I asked myself this question, I was wandering around a casino in Las Vegas, taking endless delight in the pit bosses and the poker players and the blue-haired slot-machine queens and the change girls and the gacky carpet and the noise and the lights and everything. I almost imagined that they'd built



the whole darn casino just for me. With a flash of revelation, it hit me that this was my strong comic perspective: The world is my circus. Everything I see or hear or experience, everything that happens anywhere on earth, is just for my amusement. There's a guy in Colombia who considers it his mission in life to grow great beans for my coffee. DJs play my favorite songs without my having to ask. The IRS would never audit *my* taxes, unless they thought I'd get a kick out of the experience.

Of course this is an exaggeration, and of course I don't carry this attitude with me everywhere I go. But when I need a comic perspective, it's useful to have "the world is my circus" handy. At least I know where my next joke is coming from. Take a moment to ponder your own strong comic perspective. You don't have to settle on one, and you can always change your answer later, but if you're trying to be funny, it's useful to know what part of your personality already is funny.

Find your comic perspective and you have found your comic voice, the platform on which your humor can reliably and consistently stand from now until the day you die. Maybe even beyond.

Beyond? Oh, yes. Consider W.C. Fields. His strong comic perspective was that of a gruff curmudgeon. With the words on his tombstone, "On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia," his comic perspective transcended his own death. That, folks, is a *strong* comic perspective.