



JANICE THOMPSON, AUTHOR

# Adding Humor to Your Novel

 0 Comments



*"Through humor, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once*

*you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it."*

*Bill Cosby*

Humor writing comes naturally to some authors. Others have to work hard to be funny. (Sounds funny, doesn't it. . .working hard to be funny?) I'm one of those who came into the world with an overactive funny bone. Oh, it occasionally gives me trouble. Life's woes kick in and my funny bone gets arthritic. It locks up. Whenever that happens, I trip myself on purpose, just to loosen it back up again. (Hey, a girl can only go so long without laughter!)

So, how do I loosen up my funny bone so that I can add humorous elements to my stories? I'm about to offer my top ten tips, so buckle your seatbelts!

**TIP ONE: Create unique characters that readers can genuinely relate to.** Think of your favorite sitcom. For me, *Everybody Loves Raymond* is near the top of the list. Why did I love that show so much? The characters were (individually) hysterical. Each one had his/her own quirks. And those quirks got them into (and out of) jams. Funny characters also mess up. . .a lot. They get in trouble and need help getting out. We relate because we're the same way. When you set out to write a comedy, create a cast of characters that you absolutely love. Don't just focus on one or two. Choose at least three characters in your story who really have that extra "zing." Characters that readers will remember for years to come. In my "Weddings by Bella" series, I created several funny characters (and boy, have I heard from readers about them). These characters include Aunt Rosa, Uncle Laz, Bella and the trio of "sisters" from Splendor, Texas. These wacky people will stay with me for the rest of my life. I think some of my readers have adopted them, as well.

**TIP TWO: Diversify your cast.** (We are all unique, after all.) Make sure you have distinctly different characters in your story. They need to have different opinions,

different lifestyles, different personalities, different ways of dealing with their troubles. Throw these very different characters into an unusual situation and watch them each scramble. . .in their own unique ways. The contrast of styles is half the fun. Think of *I Love Lucy*. Were there ever four more different people than Lucy, Ricky, Fred and Ethel? Because of their differences, we knew there would be conflict. And because of the conflict, we knew it would be chaotic and funny. I would also suggest you diversify the ages of your characters. Put elderly people and kids together in the same scene. And why not diversify by mixing up the cultures and races of your cast? Different characters. . .greater opportunity for humor.

**TIP THREE: *Exaggeration*.** If your character is tall, make him really tall. Chubby? Make her exceptionally chubby. Nervous? Make him overly anxious. Claustrophobic? Carry it a bit further than the norm. Does she like to wear lipstick? Make it Pollyanna Pink or Ruby Red. Give that character an exaggerated "sticking point" that readers will remember. And, exaggerate plotline highs and lows, as well. Is she in a valley? Make it a deep one. Is he on the mountaintop? Give him the experience of a lifetime. Think, again, of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Raymond's brother Robert was an exaggerated character. His moodiness was definitely over-the-top. But it worked, especially in contrast to the silliness of some of the other characters.

**TIP FOUR: *Situational comedy*.** Spend time watching for humorous moments in your own life. What "situations" get you giggly? Think about placing your characters in a "situation" that will play out in a humorous way. By way of example, let's look again at *I Love Lucy*. Did we really find it believable that a housewife would take a job in a chocolate factory and end up shoving candies down her blouse? Um, probably not. Did we laugh like hyenas when the episode aired? You betcha! Did we really think that a housewife would start her own company making salad dressing and eventually bankrupt her husband's finances? Nope. But we bought it for thirty minutes. *I Love Lucy* was the perfect example of a situational comedy. Week after

week we waited to see what "situation" our gal would end up in. We empathized with her (this is very important) and we thought she was a little kooky. In short, we saw a little of ourselves in her.

**TIP FIVE: *Slapstick*.** Think of Larry, Mo and Curly. Sure, their antics got a little old after a while, but you get the idea. "Physical" comedy (tripping over things, physical gags, etc.) has always had its place in humor writing. This tactic has been used a lot in comedic movies. Think about the old Barbara Streisand movie, *What's Up Doc?* The film was loaded with slapstick elements, especially during the San Francisco chase scene. I would caution you to use slapstick sparingly, but don't rule it out.

**TIP SIX: *Speaking of Larry, Mo and Curly: Work in threes*.** Three funny characters as a trio. Three funny situations in a row. Threes have always worked in comedy. "Three nuns walked into a bar..." "A pilot, a priest and a rabbi boarded a plane..." (etc.) See what I mean? Funny people love the number three.

**TIP SEVEN: *Pacing*.** There's much to be said about the placement of words, phrases and inflections. Pacing is truly everything in comedy. And don't be afraid to try different things. In many respects, it is learned by trial and error. If you aren't sure something is working, run it by your critique partners. See if they're tickled by your words. For a good example of comedic pacing, watch a few *Golden Girls* episodes. Timing was everything in that show.

**TIP EIGHT: *The Punch Line*.** If you're writing comedy, make sure you leave the reader anticipating a "Wowza!" punch line. Don't give away too much too soon. Adequately build the story, then. . .bam! Punch line!

**TIP NINE: *Do the opposite thing*.** Place your character in a scene and then have

him or her do the very opposite thing the reader expects.

**TIP TEN: *Live the Life: Let humor lead the way.*** In my own life, I find that being funny on the page is easier when I'm truly walking through life with a joyous attitude. It's not always easy (and life often intervenes, threatening to remove any hint of humor), but it is possible. Check out this verse: "*A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones.*" (Proverbs 17:22) When we transfer our "merry heart" to the page, then we're sharing the joy with our readers. Is there any greater honor?

## The Humor Formula

All great comedic pieces (for movies, television and books) are built on situations beyond the primary character's control, and most have an easy-to-follow ten-step formula. To clarify how this formula works, I'm going to share a real "situation" that occurred in my life a few weeks back.

### 1. THE SETUP/STACKING THE DECK

My story begins on a weekday afternoon. A friend called me on my cell phone just as I pulled up to a local grocery store. We were talking diets—specifically, talking about healthy eating, nutritional supplements, etc. I got out of my car, used the remote on my key ring to lock the car, tossed my keys in my purse, and started walking to the front of the store. When I reached the front door, I grabbed a basket, tossed my purse inside, and then stepped into the produce department, ready to buy all sorts of healthy goodies. I kept talking to my friend. Though distracted—*Have I mentioned I have A.D.D.?*—I started adding things to my basket: strawberries, blackberries and so on. I caught a glimpse of the fresh green beans off in the distance and pondered how I might go about loading a produce bag with them while still on the phone.

Common sense would dictate that I end the call and focus on shopping. I've never been known for my common sense. Pushing thoughts of green beans aside, I eyed the organic carrots. Yum. I needed some of those and could easily grab them while chatting with my friend.

## **2. THE FAUX PAS/THE ERROR IN JUDGMENT**

I turned away from my basket to walk toward the carrots. In the meantime, the phone conversation grew livelier by the minute. I glanced down, nabbed the carrots, turned back toward my basket, tossed them inside, and then looked down at the spot where I'd placed my purse. W-w-what? No purse? You had to be kidding me!

## **3. THE KNEE-JERK REACTION/THE PANIC PHASE**

I went into an immediate panic. Told my friend my purse had been stolen. Shoved my phone in my pocket. Where else could I put it, really? Raced toward the door, convinced I must've left my purse in my SUV. Only one problem. . .I clearly remembered locking the SUV. How could I have done that without my remote? Still, I had to check the car, just in case.

## **4. THE COMPLICATION/THE TWIST**

I sprinted out of the store, headed toward my vehicle. About halfway there, I realized I was pushing the cart. Oh no! The cart was loaded with produce. . .produce I hadn't paid for. I stopped in the middle of the parking lot and pondered what this must look like on the security camera. Frantic woman races from store toward her car with groceries she has not paid for. Oh, help! If they called the police, I couldn't even prove my identity. After all, my I.D. was now M.I.A.

## **5. THE "I CAN FIX THIS" PHASE/THE WOULD-BE SOLUTION**

I looked back and forth between the front door of the store and my vehicle, just yards away. My instinct told me to go to the SUV to check for the purse and then go back inside the store to explain. Unfortunately, my vehicle—as I'd suspected—was locked tight. I peered through the windows, hoping to see my purse on the front seat. Nope. No purse. If I tried the old-fashioned "stick a coat hanger down through the window" technique, I would be accused of not only stealing fruits and vegetables, but an SUV, as well! So, I turned back to the store, my thoughts in a whirlwind.

## **6. THE MOMENT OF RELIEF/THE "CATCH YOUR BREATH" PHASE**

As I approached the store—no police in sight—I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew what must've happened! Surely, when I'd arrived at the store in the first place, I must've slung my purse into one basket and grabbed another. Why, sure. I would look in the basket area for my purse and then I'd laugh about it when I went to customer service to explain why I'd accidentally "almost" stolen the fruits and veggies.

## **7. THE TWIST/THE DIVERSION TACTIC**

Only one problem. My purse wasn't in the basket area. In fact, as I took a step inside the store, I truly had no idea how I could possibly fix this problem. I would simply have to put all of the food back and call someone to drive me home. What a mess!

## **8. GOTCHA!/THE PUNCHLINE**

As I stepped inside the store, a woman—probably in her early thirties—stopped me. "Ma'am!" she said. "I believe you've taken my basket!" W-w-w-what?" I stared down at the basket, this time paying closer attention to its contents, and realized the fruits

and veggies weren't exactly what I tossed inside. Close, but not exact. The lady pointed to the area in front of the green beans. "There's a basket over there with a purse inside." I looked that way and, lo and behold. . .my purse! Oh, praise the Lord! Hallelujah! The woman shook her head and, in a motherly voice, said, "Ma'am, you really shouldn't leave your purse in a basket like that. It could be stolen!"

## **9. THE SCRAMBLE/PLAYING THE FOOL**

I felt like a fool, as you might imagine. Profuse apologies followed as I gave the woman her basket. Several people gave me funny looks as I sprinted toward the correct basket, but no one said a word—except the woman, who continued to tell me that I needed to calm down. Calm down? I'd lost my purse, stolen fresh produce and played the role of a cart thief, all within a five-minute span. How could I possibly calm down? Instead, I raced through the store on the world's fastest shopping extravaganza, then got the heck out of Dodge, determined never to shop in that store again!

## **10. OBTAINING PERSPECTIVE/THE TAKE-AWAY**

As I drove away, I replayed the situation in my mind. Laughter followed. Lots of it. In that moment, I came to an important conclusion: A.D.D. people shouldn't drink 'n drive—er, talk on the phone and load a shopping cart. We simply don't have the wherewithal to do both at the same time.

So, there you have it, my friends. A real life "situation" broken down into the same ten steps that are used in nearly every sitcom, comedic book or hilarious movie. The next time you're in a wacky/embarrassing "situation" take some time after-the-fact to replay it, scene by scene. You might just discover those ten formulaic steps, lined up in a perfect row. Then, if you're feeling the nudge, you can use that formula to add



humor to your WIP.

## **FUN QUOTES ON HUMOR FROM SOME OF THE GREATS:**

*Comedy has to be based on truth. You take the truth and you put a little curlicue at the end.*

**Sid Caesar**

*Humor is merely tragedy standing on its head with its pants torn.*

**Irvin S. Cobb**

*When humor goes, there goes civilization.*

**Erma Bombeck**

**By JThompson**  
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**Fiction Lessons**

Edit

**← Adding Mystery Elements**

## Adding a Romantic Thread →

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