

WORD CRAFT: RAYMOND SILLER,  
COMEDY WRITER

# Heeere's... Johnny's Writer!

"TAKE MY WIFE...please!" That signature line, delivered by the late comedian Henny Youngman, may be the purest instance of economy in comedy.

Those four monosyllables contain the essentials of a good joke. In the set-up, Henny ostensibly starts to tell a story about his wife. But then he whiplashes his listeners, turning the sentence into a plaintive cry of despair with the payoff word "please!"



In Henny's day, Americans were primed for wife-and-mother-in-law gags. Today's humor is more observational, dealing with everyday events. But some things never change. Comedy writers are liars. A joke that kills uses misdirection, exaggeration and surprise to deceive. The listener shouldn't see the sucker punch line coming.

Comedians and their writers are often considered rebels against authority, but most of the successful ones echo the views of the audience. It's reassuring to hear your favorite late-night host report that he, too, was subjected to a prostate exam by the TSA screener at the airport. Universal experiences work best. It's harder to get a laugh about a Martian landing in a Jacuzzi than about a trip to Costco.

Compassion need not apply in the comedy writers' room, but the goal is to amuse, not to editorialize. Grinding out topical material every day requires speed and prayer. You don't have the luxury to audition it at a club and can only guess how it will go down before a live studio audience.

Stick to snared experience. It's harder to get a laugh about Martians than about a trip to Costco.

Even natural disasters are fodder for laughs, as long as there were no deaths. "The earthquake's epicenter was in Beverly Hills. No injuries, but 1,200 faces shifted." That's an easy slam dunk at the expense of Rodeo Drive's pampered glitterati.

On the morning of my former boss Johnny Carson's live, prime-time anniversary special in 1987, a major quake struck southern California. I phoned Johnny in Malibu, where his own home had suffered damage. "Dump the monologue you wrote," he said, "and have the guys do a new one on the quake. We'll get huge numbers tonight. People will tune in to see if I'm still alive."

It helps when an object of derision has been previously defined, like a cheating evangelist or a celebrity in serial rehab. The crowd is pre-conditioned to enjoy these smackdowns, which makes the writer's job relatively simple. The mere mention of a public figure can bulk up an otherwise weak line. It can deal a fatal blow to a politician's chances of ever being taken seriously again.

But I learned the hard way that the celebrities we trash are not immune to hurt feelings. Ed Asner, the stocky star of "Lou Grant," whom I'd repeatedly bludgeoned in "Tonight Show" jokes, was by chance my aisle-mate once on a cross-country flight. He was amiable company, but he let me know how much he was stung by our repeated references to his body parts. That was the last time he showed up in anything I wrote.

The "rule of three" is a staple in our racket. In monologues, three seems to be the maximum number of jokes that can be done on a topic before an audience gets restless. And many jokes have three parts. How often have you heard about the priest, the rabbi and the minister?

Don't ask me why, but certain words are inherently funny. "Hat" and "squat" come to mind.

And the comedy writer doesn't want to wander into extraneous verbiage. To channel Henny Youngman: If a joke can be composed in 11 words, don't use 12. Cut that extra adverb. Take my knife...please!

*Mr. Siller was the longtime head writer on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson."*