

MAKE IT FUNNY

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HOW TO WRITE FUNNY – Add Humor to Every Kind of Writing

A Writer's Digest Book, featuring fifteen contributors and Edited by John B. Kachuba

Not long ago, I received a “nice” rejection from an editor for one of my manuscripts. Along with a suggestion to lose a character, she said, “Make it funnier.” How the heck do you write funnier?

After mulling the editor's suggestion around for a while, I did what any respectable professional would do. I bought a how-to book from the most recent RWA conference bookstore entitled, *How to Write Funny*, and tried to glean “funny” wisdom from it for my personal editing.

Romance author, Jennifer Crusie, (*Bet Me*, and *Fast Women*) wrote Chapter Five, “Comedy Workshop.” She hit the nail on the head with her very first sentence: “Writing comedy is hard because ‘funny’ is subjective.”

Well, there you go, did I even need to read one more word?

It turns out Ms. Crusie did have a great deal of practical advice and, as anyone that has ever read one of her novels will attest, she has “know-how” on the fine art of being funny. Here

are the main points she drove home:

- “Humor begins in the writer’s **voice**.”
- “Humor reveals more about **character** than anything else except action.”
- “Humor, like **plot**, is often couched in expectation and reversal.”
- “The best humor, the strongest and most thoughtful humor, comes from a serious **theme**.”

Writing funny isn’t all about making wisecracks and taking pratfalls. First, we have to dig deep to find what no “how-to” book can impart: A unique style of storytelling. Only through writing thousands and thousands of words will we discover our distinctive **voice**, and if we concentrate too hard on finding it, it will elude us. But once we’ve stumbled upon our voice we must nurture it, because according to Crusie, it’s essential to good, humorous writing.

In regards to **character**, she cautions the aspiring writer to avoid the temptation to settle for thinking up a funny situation and simply dropping your characters in it. As Crusie says, “Humor is carried by character, not by action or plot. Comedy is not found in premise, it’s found in the characters’ reactions to premise.” Like every other aspect of writing, it’s not easy to create a funny story, because you can’t stop there, you’ve got to bring goal, motivation, and conflict into everything you write.

Dang.

Remember that great line you recently thought up? That witty, remarkable sentence that you swore would leave your mark on the writing annals for all time? Okay, so it was me who did that. According to Ms. Crusie, snappy banter does not substitute for character. “No

conversation belongs in a story just because it's funny," she notes. Something important must always be communicated even in a game of verbal ping pong. The witty conversation must either develop insight into your character, or move your plot along. And more importantly, she says, "Banter should never be insulting or hurtful."

Well, heck, what's the fun of that?

On the subject of humor and plot, Ms. Crusie has this to say: "From the first sentence of your story, you set up an expectation...every funny scene you write will be stronger if you use the reversal of that expectation to surprise the laughter out of the reader." Though, she cautions against overusing the "reversal" technique citing: "You want to give your readers a ride, not whiplash."

Setting is another useful device for using expectation and reversal. The fish-out-of-water tale works, according to Crusie, because it reverses the reader's expectation of that setting. Her example is a picture of man in a suit with a briefcase standing in the ocean with his pants rolled up to his knees. If he were standing on Wall Street, it would be humorless. So take note, "the context of setting can heighten tension and create humor."

Once again, she drives the point home that, "The reversals in your story must be unexpected and yet clearly motivated by the characters of the players."

For me, the meatiest portion of Crusie's chapter from *How to Write Funny*, focused on theme. She had this to say: "Comedy is about pain because good comedy is about truth, and while the truth may set you free, it almost always inflicts a few wounds before letting you go."

In other words, to have meaningful humor, you must ground it with seriousness.

Why am I not laughing about this notion of mine to write light and superficial subjects and **still** be truly funny? Maybe it's because Ms. Crusie talks about a necessity in comedy writing known as an "explosion of relief." She says, "Without a strong serious theme to bounce against, pure comedy can't offer relief from anything."

Yes, writing comedy *is* hard, and Jennifer Crusie describes it like singing. "If you have perfect pitch, it's much easier." But for those of us mediocre singers and blossoming writers with aspirations to sing like Ella Fitzgerald, and write like Woody Allen, she says to trust your voice and to concentrate on your characters and tell the story they—and you—have to tell.

If you're lucky, someone may think it's funny.

Throughout the Comedy Workshop chapter, there are nine excellent exercises to help the writer practice what Crusie preaches. I purposely left them out to entice you to buy and read the book. If your goal is to be a funny or funnier writer, in my opinion, *How to Write Funny*, is essential.