

36 Comedy Devices for Writing Material
***Fine-Tuning Your Funny Muscle* by Mike Lukas**
Prepared by Bill Stanley

A. Classic Devices

1. Exaggeration—a statement that represents something as better or worse than it really is. In comedy, exaggeration serves to drastically overstate your take (as seen through your Comedy Lens) by such a ridiculous amount that it becomes hilarious.
2. Sarcasm—the use of words that mean the opposite of what the speaker really thinks in order to insult, show irritation, or be funny. Uses tone to express feelings opposite to the words spoken.
3. Simile—a figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid. A simile usually contains the word “like,” “as,” “so,” or “than.”
4. Metaphor—a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract.
5. Understatement—a hyper-generic, overly polite way to restate something extreme, so it doesn’t sound extreme at all, or even benign. This undercuts the seriousness of the setup.
6. Funny Specifics/Phrases—the replacement of general descriptions with more specific characterizations and peppering your material with these funny-sounding terms and descriptions.

B. Shifting Devices

7. Cut Back To...—a conversation, activity, idea, or any scenario prior to the joke or bit that in some way illuminates the setup’s past history.
8. Cut Forward to...—a conversation, activity, idea, or any scenario after the joke or bit that in some way illuminates the setup’s future.
9. Negative to Positive—the statement that expresses an upside to an obvious downer.
10. Positive to Negative—the statement that turns an obvious upside into a sudden downer.
11. Extension—a play, using a lot of imagination, on the question “If this is true, what else might be true?”

C. Point of View Devices

12. Self-Reflection—putting yourself into the POV of the main character who’s causing the tension. “If it were I, I would be saying, thinking, or doing...”
13. Different Perspectives—putting yourself into the POV of a side character in the story, perhaps someone who’s just watching. “If it were I, I would be saying, thinking, or doing...”
14. Anthropomorphizing—to attribute human qualities to animals, objects, or phenomena, especially giving them words, opinions, and prejudices as they act in human ways.

D. Breaking Norm Devices

15. Unlikely Scenarios—combining two things that you don't find together in the world.
16. Uncommon Worlds—having a character (even anthropomorphized) engaging in what would be an absurd or even inappropriate activity.
17. Time Line—adding a series of very specific, step-by-step, chronological details to a scenario in a setup.
18. Incongruent—considering what life would be like if any part of normal patterns of life were to somehow (and unexpectedly) change.

E. Solution Devices

19. Problem Solve—presenting solutions to common or even out-of-the-box problems. These solutions need to be consistent with your point of view.
20. Fantasy Outlet for Frustration—finishes the sentence “If only I could...” when faced with some frustration or annoyance.
21. Poetic Justice—creating a scenario in which the antagonist in your bit pays a price for the hostile or ill-disposed behavior.

F. Fantasy Devices

22. Made-Up Institutions/Products—using fictitious words, people, institutions, or products to spice up the scenario and enhance the effect you are trying to achieve.
23. Parody TV Show, Movie, Song, etc.—using a known genre of media or cultural activities as a container or presenting subject of your bit.
24. Voices/Impersonations—giving specific voices, gestures, and posture to characters in your bits, whether known or unknown.
25. Sound Effects—using sounds that you create to enhance the auditory nuances of your story.

G. Compare and Contrast Devices

26. Contrast—sizing up two seemingly unconnected things against each other to discover their similarities and differences.
27. Bait and Switch—painting an initial picture seemingly leading to a fairly expected outcome. Then, one of the main elements becomes something completely unexpected: a misdirect.
28. Overstating the Obvious—stating something obvious about the thing you're talking about as if it is your especially clever insight.
29. Reinterpretation—Naming two things about a person (ethnicity, habit, occupation, hobby) and then reinterpreting the person based on the combination the two. Doesn't have to be a person.

H. Tricky Devices

30. Wordplay—finding a word with a double meaning to play with the subject matter. It often generates its own kind of misdirect.
31. Sexual Innuendo—combining or overlaying any topic with the world of sex.
32. Misinterpretation—Using the double meaning of a word, phrase, or word in a phrase to create a surprising misunderstanding.
33. Superiority—imagining someone (real) who is or someone (imaginary) would be in a worse or more awkward situation than you.
34. Irony—the collision of embarrassing opposites to create a contradiction in behavior, attitude, or being.
35. Recognition—referring to familiar knowledge and experiences to explore the way we engage with them or to illuminate common insights.
36. Callback—relating the present moment or subject matter with a previous experience or punchline in the routine or story.