

# **YOU ARE ALL TERRIBLE**

**By Harrison Greenbaum**



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# A NOTE ABOUT THIS .PDF

Hey there! If you're downloading this, it's because you saw my lecture, so CONGRATULATIONS! You survived all those penis jokes.

Keep in mind that this lecture will continue to grow and evolve so please:

**DON'T** share with anybody else

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and

**DEFINITELY DON'T** share this link or upload this anywhere else on the Internet.

However, **DO** feel free to spread the lessons you've learned because it just might help make magic a little less terrible.

In other words... this is being provided to you solely as a fun bonus of sitting through my yammering, so just keep it between us gals, okay?

In love and magic and some other third thing,  
Harrison

P.S. Penis

P.P.S. Sorry had to do it.

P.P.P.S. Penis again.

P.P.P.P.S. Not sorry that time.

P.E.N.I.S. Okay, one more time.



## YOU ARE ALL TERRIBLE

HARRISON GREENBAUM

WWW.HARRISONGREENBAUM.COM • GENIICOLUMN@HARRISONGREENBAUM.COM

## SURPRISE!

**WHO THE HELL IS THIS GUY?** I've been a magician ever since I was five, which explains why I didn't lose my virginity until I was 18<sup>1</sup>. I went to Magic Camp (which is like those Christian camps where they try to turn gay kids straight, except the exact opposite), eventually becoming a counselor there, and went away to college (Harvard, but I'm not going to rub it in your face the way people usually do), where I apprenticed and eventually became a regular performer at the Mystery Lounge (which is located in Harvard Square, which is where Harvard is, which is where I went to school, that school being Harvard).

The Mystery Lounge was (and still is!) every Tuesday on the third floor of a Chinese restaurant called the Hong Kong. On every other day except Monday that space is a comedy club known as the Comedy Studio, which is magical in its own right. Magic was (and still is!) one of the great passions of my life, but hanging out at the Comedy Studio on the other nights, I discovered that I loved stand-up comedy, too. I noticed that, as much as I enjoyed astonishing people with my magic, I loved the incredible challenge that came with making them laugh. And the idea that I could go on stage with *nothing* but my own words and make people do this involuntary thing—laughter!—seemed like an adrenaline rush too good to pass up.

The summer of my freshman year, I interned for *MAD* Magazine while simultaneously going to open mikes and barking for stage time wherever and whenever I could.<sup>2</sup> It was comedy boot camp—and I loved it. Fast-forward a couple of years and I was the founder of the Harvard College Stand-Up Comic Society (the acronym was Harvard College SUCS—boom, roasted!) and performing all over the East Coast. My transition from magic to comedy was complete. (Or so I thought.)

<sup>1</sup> Although this is a magic magazine, so I realize losing one's virginity at 18 might sound like bragging.

<sup>2</sup> "Barking" refers to the practice of handing out flyers and promoting a show on street corners in exchange for stage time on that show—I generally would get five minutes on stage while audience members paid their checks in exchange for two hours or more of barking. In other words, "barking" also means "humbling a Harvard kid who thought he was the next Seinfeld one year into comedy."

### WHY TELL YOU THIS STORY?

I feel really fortunate to live in two worlds: that of comedy and that of magic. There's a lot in common between the two, but also very much that is different, and that is where this column was born. (And if the most profound thing I could say is that comedy and magic are both similar and different, then I might be in trouble.) As a comedian and a magician, I'd like to share with you what I've learned to make you both a funnier performer and a better performer in general. So, get ready for an interesting journey: buckle up, stow your baggage, and hope this flight isn't going to the metaphorical equivalent of Malaysia.

### AND WHAT IS THE POINT, SIR?

In the next column, we're going to discuss how the creative process in comedy differs significantly from the creative process of magic—and why that means you're doing it all wrong. In the months following, I'll describe to you the Necktie Theory of Comedy, which explains what is at the core of every joke every written, as well as the three Core Concepts of Comedy and how applying them to your jokes and performances as a whole will make you a funnier, better performer. I will also sneak in some bathroom humor, a political reference or two, and probably at least one or two jokes in such poor taste that you might want to write a letter to the editor. I consider that par for the course.

### CAN YOU AT LEAST TEACH ME ONE THING, SO THAT THIS FIRST ARTICLE IS NOT ENTIRELY POINTLESS?

One of the things they both long joke as a verbal premise for sex maximize the greater the su

I can't convince you to stop doing stock jokes (and by "stock," I mean, "any jokes you do that you've heard other magicians doing, too") because it's bad art (and bad for

Penis!

3 Penis!

# What you will see:

- Be more **original**.
  - Magic as art
  - How do you currently create magic?
  - How *should* you create magic?
- Be **funnier**.
  - How can I make you/your jokes funnier?
  - Components of a joke
  - 3 C's of Comedy
  - Secret algorithm of comedy
- **Be less terrible.**

**ART:**

**BE MORE ORIGINAL**

**CREATING ART**

**Is magic art?**

**What *is* art?**



If you can't define what *art* is,  
how do you know magic is *that*?

**CREATING ART**

# Most magic isn't art.

Too many magicians are:  
performing tricks they didn't invent  
with scripts they didn't write  
based on performances they saw someone else  
do...

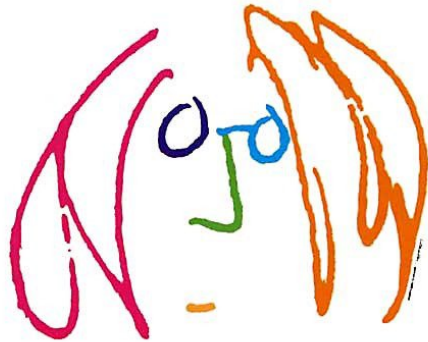
...and still call *that* art.

# Most magic isn't art.

- You're not the Beatles... you're a Beatles cover band.
- Just because the audience doesn't know that the Beatles wrote the "songs" you're playing doesn't make you John Lennon.

I M A G I N E  
*John Lennon*

IF YOU CREATED YOUR OWN STUFF



# How do most artists create?

- Come up with an idea.
- Figure out the techniques you'd need to express that idea.
- Express that idea, filtered through the artist's voice.
- COME UP WITH IDEA → LEARN TECHNIQUE → CREATE ART



## **BOB ROSS**

- **IDEA:** Clouds
- **TECHNIQUE:** Marijuana

# How do magicians create?

- Discover a cool trick or technique.
- Figure out a way to present it that may or may not be unique.
- Hope that it expresses some kind of authentic idea. (But if it doesn't, at least it's a cool trick!)

# Artist's Approach

- “I want to paint the a nude woman.”
- Figures out the best techniques to paint skin tones, methods for capturing human form, etc.
- Filters all of that through the artist's voice
- Paints picture of nude woman.



# Magician's Approach

- Goes to magic store, sees latest release is a video on painting nude women.
- Invents some story about how his grandfather once showed him nude women and uses technique to illustrate it.
- Banned from performing at a child's birthday party ever again.



# Most magic isn't art.

## iPhone Theory of Magic



# Most magic isn't art.

~~iPhone Theory of Magic~~



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If all you do is take the existing presentation and “customize” it to you, you’re not changing it enough to create art.

# How to create magic that *is* art

- Figure out **what you want to say**.
- Then figure out a way to say **that** magically.

# How to create magic that *is* art

## EXAMPLE: Price is Right Trick

### – **Come up with an idea**

- I have a Price is Right joke in my stand-up (that comes from something in my actual non-magic life)
- Wanted to play a game with the audience in which I basically can prove I'm the best contestant (i.e. guess prices)

### – **Figure out the techniques you need to express that idea.**

- That means mentalism
- That means some kind of prediction effect.
- Mental Epic!
- Buying every kind of mental epic board to figure out which is the most conducive to actually playing the game with the audience.

### – **Express that idea.**

- Spend 10 years doing it 1,000s of times to make it a staple of the act.
- You went to Harvard and now you're doing *this*. They cancel each other out.
- It's like being straight, and being stuck with this voice.

If *ideas* come before *techniques*, why come to lectures and learn all of these techniques?


- Shut up, Jew.
- How'd you know I was a Jew?
- Because it's an event with magicians, so the odds are very high
- You're building up the knowledge and skill of your craft so that when you come up with your dream effects, you have the ability to make them a reality.

# Where do ideas come from?

- Keep a little notebook with you at all times!
  - Notebook on your nightstand
  - Notebook in your shower (Rite in the Rain, AquaNotes)
  - Notebook anywhere you can put it
  - Note app (Evernote, Bear, Notes)
- Have a life.
  - I know, I know, you're a magician, so you probably don't, but try, won't you?
- Mike Birbiglia: Art should feel like a scab is being ripped away. Painful and revealing. Art so personal you'd be embarrassed if your parents heard it. (And they will.)
- What affects you in a strong emotional way?
  - What makes you angry, frustrated, happy, sad, horny (especially if it's weird stuff)?
- Enjoy other art and keep track of "theatrical moments" - what, how, and why moments do those affect you?
  - Example: *Usual Suspects*, *The Producers*

# What does it mean to have a **unique voice**?

- What is your stage persona/character?
  - Magnified version of you or completely different invention?
    - Magnified version: you're Clark Kent, what is your Superman?

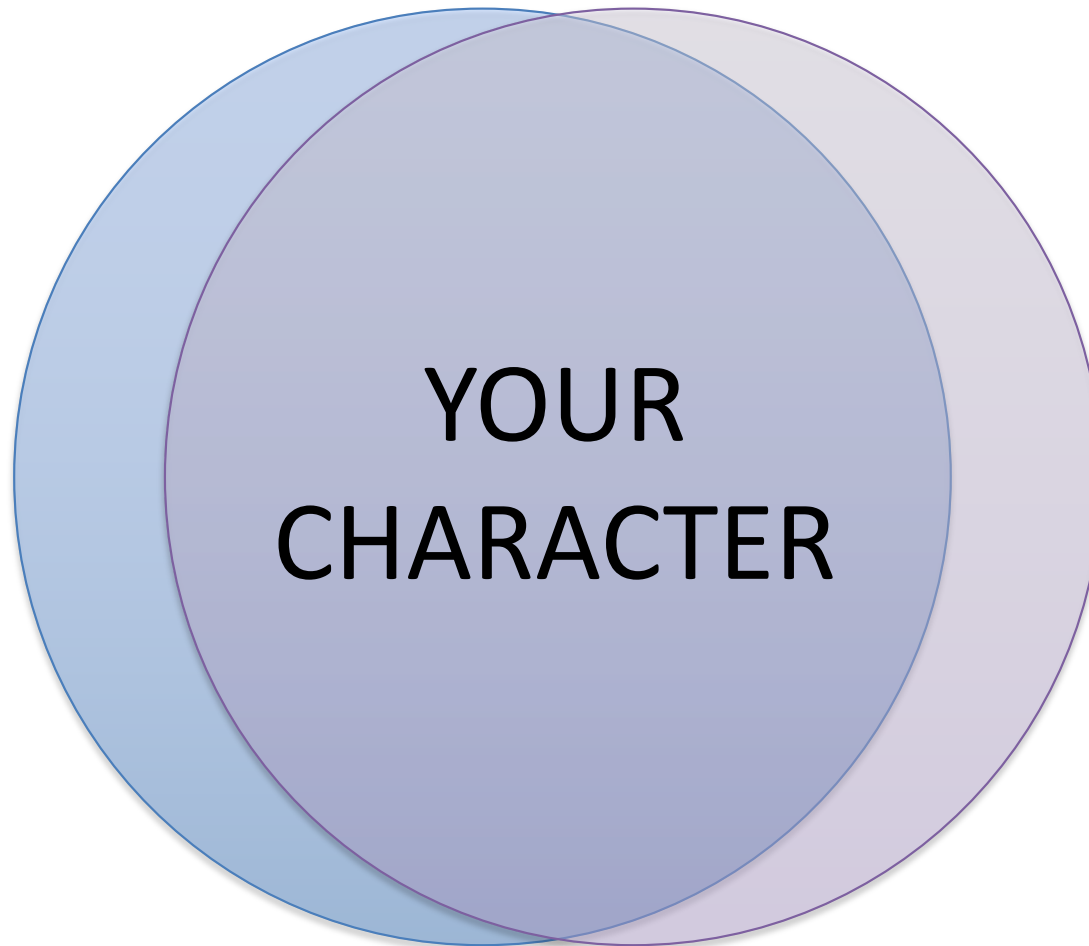


**YOUR  
PERCEPTION  
OF WHO  
YOU ARE**



**THE  
AUDIENCE'S  
PERCEPTION  
OF WHO YOU  
ARE**





**YOUR  
CHARACTER**

# What does it mean to have a **unique voice**?

- What is your stage persona/character?
  - Magnified version of you or completely different invention?
    - Magnified version: you're Clark Kent, what is your Superman?
  - “magician who does magic tricks” is not a character
    - Although it should be a reason for committing you
- Test of strong character: can someone do an impression of you?
  - Mac King
    - Southern accent, perform in afternoon
  - David Blaine
    - Just don't do anything and/or OD on Benadryl
  - Criss Angel
    - Wait a couple of years & do whatever you did for David Blaine

# What does it mean to have a **unique voice**?

- Art is about expressing your point of view (POV), which means opinion, which means people will disagree!
- If 100% of people like your art, you're not expressing a strong enough opinion.
  - **Vanilla pudding**: people aren't against it, but nobody *loves* it.
  - **Sushi**: sure, a few people *really* hate it, but the people that like it *love* it.



# Why create **ART**?

“The successful performers of my acquaintance consciously and conscientiously take the hard way, for that will be what separates them from the herd.”

– Ken Weber, *Maximum Entertainment 1*

*Maximum Entertainment 2: Return of the Jew*

*Maximum Entertainment 3: How Can You Have More*

*Entertainment than the Maximum?*

*That's Literally the Most Possible Already*

Creating ORIGINAL MATERIAL (i.e. ART) is **hard** but it makes all the stuff you **want** (being booked, being liked, being known) **easy**.

**COMEDY:**

**BE FUNNIER**

# What is a joke?

- **Set-up/premise**
  - Creates tension
- **Punchline**
  - Releases tension with twist or surprise
- **Tags**
  - Getting extra laughs out of a single set-up (thereby increasing laughs **per minute**, or lpm)

# What is a joke?

## COMEDY

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- **Tags**
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## MAGIC

- **Build-up/premise**
  - Creates tension
- **Revelation**
  - Releases tension with twist or surprise
- **Add'l revelations**
  - Getting extra moments of magic out of a single trick

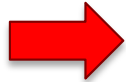
# Joke in action

**SET-UP**



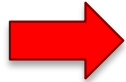
I got into an argument on the subway and a guy quoted the Bible at me. That's not fair. If you get to quote from *your* favorite book, I should be able to quote from *my* favorite book.

**PUNCHLINE**



He was like, "'Men do not live on bread alone,' Matthew 4:4" and I was like, "Everyone's a little bit magic," *Harry Potter*, Chapter 7."

**TAG**



Because one of those books is about a man who has sacrificed himself for the good of the world, and the other... is the Bible.

**TAG**



I'm glad you laughed because I did that joke the other night and a woman was like, "The Bible is true!" and I was like, "It doesn't have a bibliography!" Real books have references...



# Three **C**ore **C**oncepts of **C**omedy

**Contrast**

**Compression**

**Clarity**

Gives you the questions you can ask yourself to make  
a joke funnier.

# CONTRAST

- There are always 2 forces in conflict in every joke: find them and then enhance the contrast
- Contrast of expectations = SURPRISE!
- Distance between forces
  - A has to be far from B, but not so far that it doesn't make sense (ideal joking distance)
    - Murder mystery
      - Too obvious = too easy to solve = FRUSTRATING
      - Too difficult = no one can solve = FRUSTRATING
      - JUST RIGHT = not obvious as it unfolds, but obvious in hindsight = SATISFYING

# CONTRAST SIMILES

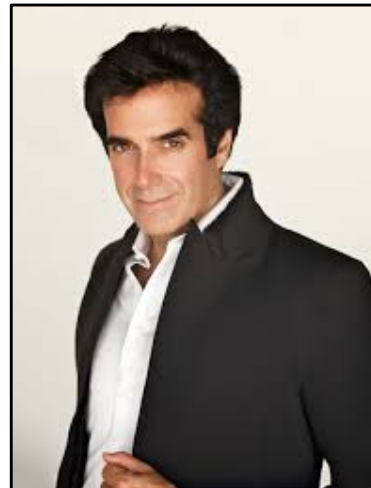
- “A *is like* B...”
  - Remember the murder mystery analogy (ideal joking distance)
- **EXAMPLE – *Let’s write a joke!***
  - **Card tricks are like farts...**
    - One is fine, but by two or three you’ve ruined the party.
    - The worst ones come from loud a\*\*holes.
    - You can’t tell yours stink.
    - The longer they last, the more uncomfortable everybody gets.
    - One mistake and you’ll have a horrible mess on your hands.

# COMPRESSION

- The most information in the smallest amount of space
- Keep cutting until it breaks and then go back one step
- Editing:
  - NO: looking for what's not necessary and removing it
  - YES: looking for what's necessary and *removing everything else*
- **How does it apply to magic?**
  - Cutting out anything unnecessary (words, moves, gestures, etc.)
  - Figuring out what the magic is and then removing everything else that is not in direct service of it.

# RULE OF 3

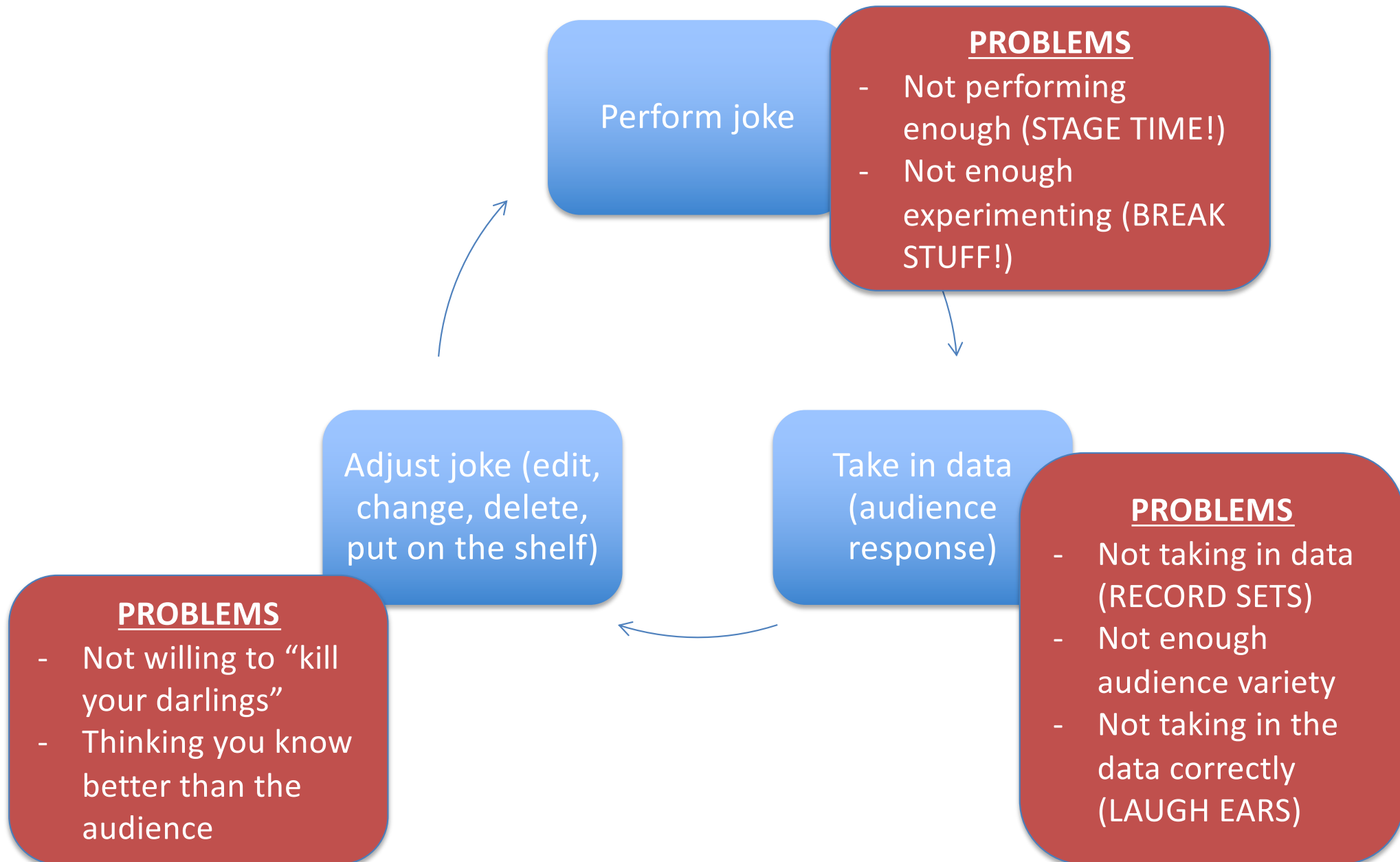
- Why is **3** the magical number in comedy?
- COMPRESSION + CONTRAST = RULE OF 3
  - Because **3** is the smallest number required (**COMPRESSION**) to create a pattern and then break it (**CONTRAST**)



# CLARITY

- Being as clear as you can – is your idea getting across exactly as you intended?
- **How does that apply to magic?** Making sure the audience is clear at *every* stage to what is (or is supposed to be) happening.
  - Simplify the process. (Clarity + Compression)
  - Remove repetitious phases. (Clarity + Contrast)

# The secret algorithm



# The secret algorithm

- Write what **you** want...
  - ORIGINALITY!
- ... and keep what **they** want
  - FUNNY!



 **YOU ARE ALL TERRIBLE**

**BUT YOU WILL GET BETTER IF YOUR GOAL  
IS TO CREATE ART**

**PLUS YOU'RE HERE WITH US  
SO YOU'RE ALREADY ON YOUR WAY**

**YOU ARE ALL TERRIBLE**

BREAK STUFF.

EXPRESS IDEAS.

MAKE ART.

BE ORIGINAL.

DON'T TOUCH KIDS.

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