

# Love of Laughter Comedy Club



Toastmasters International



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## The One-Line Joke

One-liners are the backbone of humor. One-liners inject humor without detracting from the message.

A skilled comedian can turn an average one-liner into a thought-provoking observation—on life, children, husbands, even sports. Erma Bombeck filled her column "Wits End" with clever truisms that are as sharp today as they were when she first wrote them.

"I don't think women outlive men, it only seems longer.

"There is nothing more miserable in the world than to arrive in paradise and look like your passport photo."

Columnist Dave Barry is the reigning king of pithy observations.

"Karate is a form of martial arts in which people who have had years and years of training can, using only their hands and feet, make some of the worst movies in the history of the world.

"Life is anything that dies when you stomp on it.

"Buying the right computer and getting it to work properly is no more complicated than building a nuclear reactor from wristwatch parts in a darkened room using only your teeth.

## The Basic One-Liner

The one-liner is the meat and potatoes of cartoon humor. Such gags combine a stereotype setup with a surprise caption. Since the caption can usually carry its own weight without a distinctive graphic, it can be successful in publications like Reader's Digest without any artwork at all.

"O Girl introducing one beau to another: Albert, this is Edward. Edward, this is goodbye"

5 rules for creating a one-liner:

**RULE 1:** Choose 2 topics-1) the content of the joke, and 2) the surprise topic. For example, let's say you've been putting in a lot of overtime at the office. Now, just for the sake of making this a good mental exercise, let's also say that you combine this topic with the fact that you have a dog. Here is one possibility of combining them: "I've been putting in so much overtime, that I came home to an empty house last night. I found a note. It said, 'I can't take it any more. I've gone for a long walk in the park to think over our relationship.' It was from my dog."

**RULE 2:** Look for opposites, especially ridiculous and impossible opposites. Many, many great jokes rely on opposite meanings. A few years ago at a Toastmasters meeting in which I ended

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the year of my presidency, I wanted to say a few things before turning the club over to my successor. I began by saying, "Before I formally hand over the reins of powerlessness, ..."

**RULE 3:** Build up the joke in a certain direction, so that the listener is locked into one assumption, and then spring the joke on them. For example, talk as if it is something important, and end with something trivial: "I should like to introduce my business partner, my mentor, my best friend, and a man to whom I owe five bucks, ..."

**RULE 4:** Put the key word or phrase, the one that changes the meaning, at the very end of the one-liner. You'll notice that the very last words in the previous three jokes ARE the joke (dog, powerlessness, five bucks). Imagine a cocktail party. Everyone has a drink in his or her hands, except for one guy. His wife turns to him and says, "You know, George, you really SHOULD have something to drink--otherwise people will think you're an alcoholic." This is a lot funnier than, "You don't want people to think you're an alcoholic, do you? You'd better drink something." This second line isn't as funny because the second topic (alcoholism) is introduced before the end. It blunts the surprise and therefore the comic shock at the end.

**RULE 5:** Get rid of every unnecessary word and idea. Nothing ruins a one-liner more than even one extra word. My wife, Christine, is a Paramedic with the Chicago Fire Department (She was my hero long before September 11th). She works a 24-hour shift. Over the years, I've developed a stock response to people who ask me if I'm worried about my wife being in the firehouse all night with all of those men: "Gee, you're right. I'd better call and warn those guys." Is there one unnecessary word in that response? I don't think so.

### SHOWTIME

Write a series of one-liners that could be used for bumper stickers, T-shirts, or fortune cookies. For example, write abbreviated copy for advertising your job, identifying your hometown, or promoting your sexual prowess (that won't take you long).