



The Successful One-liner, by Ashley Harkness

aharkn7825@aol.com

Phyllis Diller, Jeff Foxworthy, Johnny Carson—All world class comedians who use one-liners to make their audience laugh and laugh. What makes them funny? All the skills of delivery timing, voice inflection technique, judging the audience, exploiting repetition, and laugh building make humor out of just about anything. Overworked, they can still be funny. But, beware: The audience must fathom the one liner or they will not work.

One-line jokes are unique: they play with and upon words but are not normally puns; they required the audience to balance contradictory but related information, and they often call upon hidden common stereotypes. In this workshop, we will look at the structure of one-liners and then look at examples and techniques. We begin with an explanation.

The One-liner

One-line jokes (not puns) describe the relationship between the *connector* (part of the setup) and the *disjuncter* (a short piece of text, almost always at the end of the joke: the punchline).

They are humorous because on the surface, they violate the initial expectations of the listener. And this violation is resolved by shifting from the initial knowledge frame used to understand the joke to another *completely different knowledge frame*. We call it “the hook.”

Listeners identify these violations and subsequent frame shifts as humorous.

For example:

*I asked the bartender for something cold and filled with rum,
so he recommended his wife.*

In the joke, the violated expectation is that the bartender will fulfill the speaker's request by recommending a drink.

Two factors contribute to the generation of this expectation.

First, the listener initially interprets the object of the request as referring to a drink.

Second, the listener makes an assumption that the reply to the request will involve the object of the request, *as the listener has initially interpreted it*. (This is based on world knowledge and an understanding of how the structure of English sentences affects their semantics.)

Hence, the listener's expectation is violated when the object of the reply turns out not to involve the object the listener had in mind. This violation results from the semantic interplay between two elements within the joke, the *disjunct* and the *connector*.

The disjunct is the phrase "his wife".

The *connector* is the phrase "something cold and filled with rum".

The listener can resolve (get) the joke because both the connector and disjunct have the same referent. This, in spite of the fact that initially the listener assumes that the connector refers to something very different from the disjunct.

This occurs for two basic reasons.

First, the connector is semantically ambiguous (i.e. both "cold" and "filled with rum" have more than one meaning) which makes it possible for it to have more than one referent.

Second, the structure of the joke demands that the connector and disjunct have the same referent in order for the text to make sense.

However, the joke structure will make sense only if the object of the reply *semantically fits* with the object of the request. The two objects should relate to each other in a meaningful way.

One common way two objects can be said to semantically fit is if their meanings can be resolved to the same referent. This is a key to one-liner success. Many one-line jokes use reference resolution to violate the listener's expectations.

Reference Resolution:

For example, the ultimate meaning of the joke is to convey an insult of the bartender's wife.

This is the common referent.

Here is where it tricky: the connector and disjunctor refer to the same object and the properties of the connector become the properties of this object. Therefore, the bartender's wife *is* "something cold and filled with rum".

Since connector and disjunctor resolve to refer to same object, the listener must find an overarching knowledge frame capable of accommodating this fact:

- Initially the listener attempts to understand the joke within the context of the speaker ordering a drink in a bar.
- This initial overarching knowledge frame doesn't fit with the final realization that the connector and disjunctor refer to the same object: after all, the bartender's wife isn't a drink.
- Therefore the listener must find a new overarching knowledge frame to shift to in order to make sense of the joke.
- This new knowledge frame is that of the bartender insulting his wife, which semantically accommodates the disjunctor, 'his wife', having the properties attributed to the connector, i.e. 'cold and filled with rum'.

The Heart of the Joke.

On the surface, this joke is not funny. Were you from a foreign country, it would possibly make no sense. What is missing is the "unspoken" part. The *overarching common knowledge frame*. This joke is an example of an insult that plays on outside society knowledge: a negative stereotype for wives. Stereotypes, particularly negative ones, are often at the root of humor.

Had the disjunctor have been 'his accountant', the joke would have been weaker.

*I asked the bartender for something cold and filled with rum,
so he recommended his accountant.*

The listener still has to reinterpret the connector and make a frame shift in order to understand the text. But, it is humorous? NO, because it does not appeal to any well known negative stereotypes.

Review:

One-liners depend upon:

Relationship between Connector and Disjoiner
Violation of listener expectations
Resolution of the reference
Overarching stereotype (generally negative)

Take your ideas, know your audience, then give them a connector and a disjoiner.

Now, to some examples

If you are Jeff Foxworthy, you rely on a negative stereotype. His set-up is easy, "If your car/house/wife/dog/kids has, you must be a red-neck." The humor is in the internal comparison within the audience of things common to their life, sometimes embarrassing. (I have that at home, too. I must be a redneck.)

Phyllis Diller relied on the negative stereotype of husbands for her one liners. She could start with a simple statement and make it the call back for continuous one-liners. "My husband, Fang, walks around the house in underwear, mine." "I don't mind, except that it fits him better." Again, her one-liners can revolve around a set of expectations and hooks.

Other comedians can take a single line and build a whole series of one lines around it. Often we see them mix one-liners with longer jokes. This keeps the audience moving forward but given a "breath" to catch up with the next set-up. y

One liners can be statements or in a "question and answer" format. Here is a set of examples.

How can you get four suits for a dollar?

Buy a deck of cards.

How do dinosaurs pay their bills?

With Tyrannosaurus checks.

What do you call a dinosaur that smashes everything in its path?

Tyrannosaurus wrecks.

What do you call a dinosaur that wears a cowboy hat and boots?

Tyrannosaurus Tex.

How do we know the Indians were the first people in North America?

They had reservations.

How do you make a hot dog stand?

Steal its chair.

How do you make an egg laugh?

Tell it a yolk.

How do you prevent a Summer cold?

Catch it in the Winter!

How does a pig go to hospital?

In a hambulance.

If a long dress is evening wear, what is a suit of armor?

Silverware.

What bird can lift the most?

A crane.

What bone will a dog never eat?

A trombone.

What do you call a pig that does karate?

A pork chop.

What do you call a song sung in an automobile?

A cartoon.

What do you call the best butter on the farm?

A goat.

What do you do when your chair breaks?

Call a chairman.

What do you get if you cross a chicken with a cement mixer?

A brick layer!

What do you get if you cross an elephant and a kangaroo?

Big holes all over Australia!

What do you get if you cross an insect with the Easter rabbit?

Bugs Bunny.

What do you get when you cross a stream and a brook?

Wet feet.

What do you get when you cross poison ivy with a 4-leaf clover?

A rash of good luck.

What happens when frogs park illegally?

They get toad.

What has 6 eyes but can't see?

3 blind mice.

What can you hold without ever touching it?

A conversation.

What clothes does a house wear?

Address.

What country makes you shiver?

Chile.

What did one elevator say to the other?

I think I'm coming down with something!

What did one magnet say to the other?

I find you very attractive.

What did Tennessee?

The same thing Arkansas.

What did Delaware?

Her New Jersey.

What has a lot of keys but can not open any doors?

A piano.

What has one horn and gives milk?

A milk truck.

What is a tree's favorite drink?

Root beer.

What is the best thing to do if you find a gorilla in your bed?

Sleep somewhere else.

What kind of cats like to go bowling?

Alley cats.

What kind of eggs does a wicked chicken lay?

Deviled eggs.

What kind of ties can't you wear?

Railroad ties.

One Line Jokes.

Here are one-liners that rely on puns and other devices. They can also be the source for a whole program.

Taste makes waist
Have an adequate day
Body by Ben & Jerry
Boldly going nowhere
Clones are people two
Axe me about Ebonics
Do unto others, then run
Celibacy is not hereditary
Familiarity breeds children
Life is sexually transmitted
We do precision guesswork
Born free . . . Taxed to death
If it's too loud, you're too old
Common sense isn't common
Nothing succeeds like excess
Do pilots take crash-courses?
If it ain't broke, fix it until it is
The older I get, the older old is
Relax, its only Ones and Zeros
A closed mouth gathers no feet
Do witches run spell checkers?
I don't get even I get odder
Allow me to introduce my selves
A feature is a bug with seniority
If I throw a stick, will you leave?
Justice: A decision in your favor
Strip mining prevents forest fires
A waist is a terrible thing to mind

Do not disturb. Already disturbed
Who lit the fuse on your tampon?
Today's subliminal message is . . .
Demons are a Ghouls best Friend
A hangover is the wrath of grapes
Everyone is entitled to my opinion
If it ain't chocolate, it ain't dessert
I don't work here. I'm a consultant
Out of Body. Back in Five Minutes
The best things in life aren't things
I like feminists; I think they're cute
I'm not your type. I'm not inflatable
Does killing time damage eternity?
How can there be self-help groups?
"Criminal Lawyer" is a redundancy
BIGAMIST --- A heavy fog in Italy
If the enemy is in range, so are you
Have a nice day. . . somewhere else
Guilt -- the gift that keeps on giving
Exceptions always outnumber rules
Adults are just kids who owe money
All stressed out and no one to choke
Constipated people don't give a crap
Reality is the leading cause of stress
I may not be perfect, but I'm all I got
Where there's a will, I want to be in it
Anything not nailed down is a cat toy
Never miss a good chance to shut up
All computers wait at the same speed
Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder
Hookt On Fonicks Werked Four Me
How do you get off a non-stop flight?

How come night falls but day breaks?
How do I set the laser printer to stun?
If we quit voting will they all go away?
Is it time for your medication or mine?
Bugs come in through open Windows
INSTANT HUMAN (Just Add Coffee)
I'm not getting older...I'm getting bitter
When all else fails manipulate the data
I'm as confused as a termite in a yo-yo
Insanity is my only means of relaxation
No guts, no glory, no brain, same story
Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's hand grenades I throw
I'm not tense, just terribly, terribly alert
I don't suffer from stress. I'm a carrier
When money talks, the criminal walks
I can see clearly now, the brain is gone
I intend to live forever - so far, so good
Baby Philosophy - If it stinks, change it
A fool and his money are soon parting
One good turn gets most of the blanket
I'm having an out of money experience
Knocked; you weren't in. -- Opportunity
The information went data way ---->
Work is the curse of the drinking classes
Love is blind, marriage is the eye-opener
If you can't convince them, confuse them
How can I miss you if you won't go away
100,000 sperm and YOU were the
fastest?
Am I ambivalent? Well, yes and no
Not all men are annoying. Some are dead
Every morning is the dawn of a new error
Ignorance can be cured. Stupid is forever

Sarcasm is just one more service we offer
Love is grand; divorce is a hundred grand
And your crybaby whiny opinion would be?
RAM disk is NOT an installation
procedure
Age is a very high price to pay for maturity
I'll try being nicer if you'll try being smarter
Sooner or later, EVERYONE stops
smoking
Make yourself at home...clean my kitchen
If cows could fly, you'd appreciate
seagulls
All life's answers are on TV. - Bart
Simpson
One tequila, two tequila, three tequila,
floor
Crime wouldn't pay if the government ran
it
If you think talk is cheap, try hiring a
lawyer
All extremists should be taken out and
shot
I'm not being rude. You're just insignificant
He's the first in his family born without a
tail
Don't bother me. I'm living happily ever
after
Stop repeat offenders. Quit re-electing
them
Does your train of thought have a
caboose?
To avoid computer virus' practice safe
HEX
Never lay glazed donuts on your mouse
pad
All reports are in: Life is now officially
unfair

Don't feel bad. A lot of people have no talent

Program Halted --- Hit any user to continue drive?

Are part-time bandleaders semi-conductors?

Have you ever seen a plumber bite his nails?

Sometimes a single SUBJECT can be the lead in to a whole series of one-liners. The following uses religion as a subject for thematic one-liners

The Bible:

Why was Moses the most wicked man? (He broke all 10 commandments at once.)

What animal could Noah not trust? (The cheetah)

What kind of lights did Noah have on the ark? (Flood lights)

How does a lawyer resemble a rabbi? (Lawyers study the law and the profits)

What are the 2 smallest insects in the Bible? (The widow's mite(Mark 12:42) and the wicked flea(Proverbs 28:1))

What is it that Adam never saw or had, yet left 2 of them for his children? (Parents)

What Bible character may have only been a foot tall? (Nicodemus-he was a ruler)

How do we know Isaiah's parents were good business people? (They both raised a prophet)

During what season did Eve eat the forbidden fruit? (Early in the fall)

Why couldn't they play cards on the ark? (Noah was sitting on the deck)

How are rollerskates like the fruit in the Garden of Eden? (They come before the fall)

Who slept five in a bed? (David-he slept with his forefathers)

Why did the people on the ark think the horses were pessimistic? (They kept neighing)

How do we know Abraham was smart? (He knew a Lot)

What was one of the first example of math in the Bible? (God told Adam to go forth and multiply)

Why couldn't Cain please God with his offering? (Wasn't Abel)

How did God keep the oceans clean? (With Tide)

What did God say when Noah told him he wanted to build the ark out of bricks? ("No, Noah-go for wood"[gopherwood])

References:

Disjuncter Selection for One-Line Jokes," Jeff Stark, Kim Binsted, and Ben Bergen; Information and Computing Science Department, University of Hawaii, 1680 East-West Road, Honolulu, HI USA