

# USC School of Dramatic Arts

**THTR 474 Intro To Stand Up Comedy**  
**Spring 2017—Fridays—10am to 12:50pm**  
**Location: PED 208**

**Instructor: Judith Shelton**

**Office: PED 208**

**Office Hours: 1 to 1:50pm on Fridays or By Appointment**

**Contact Info: [judiths@usc.edu](mailto:judiths@usc.edu) - Monday-Thursday only**  
**626.390.3678 (c) - Friday only**

## **Course Description and Overview**

This course will offer a specific look at the art of Stand Up Comedy and serve as a laboratory for creating stand up work: jokes, bits, chunks, sets, while discovering your TRUTH and your VOICE. Students will practice bringing themselves to the stage with complete abandon and unashamed commitment to their own, unique sense of humor. We will explore the “rules” that facilitate a healthy Stand Up dynamic and draw on anything and everything for our work in class, ultimately delighting in making ourselves and others think and laugh.

## **Learning Objectives**

By the end of the course, the student will have embodied and integrated the various components of stand up comedy in a live performance in front of a comedy club audience. The creative, physical, and academic ‘strands’ of study will come together for a final assessment.

## **Proposed Objectives**

- Get familiar with a comic’s tools: notebook, mic and stand, “the light”, recording device
- Understand the five basic stages of stand up comedy: writing, “getting up”, recording, evaluating and rewriting
- Learn how to write for stand up comedy
- Examine elements of a joke: set up, punch, tags, toppers, callbacks
- Develop jokes, bits, chunks, sets, ultimately creating your act
- Take the stage with confidence, flexibility and a sense of play
- Develop an awareness of audience feedback using sight and sound
- Improvise in the moment, utilize crowdwork, edit on the spot
- Review what works and why, what does not work and why
- Participate in constant, constructive evaluation of work
- Listen to and critique recordings, re-write material as needed, adding tags, adjusting order, cutting, etc.
- Investigate the concept of “writing onstage” vs. taking the stage with a “script”
- Build a strong sense of your own point of view
- Explore your own stand up persona using physicality, personality, voice, repetition of themes, tempo, exaggeration, etc.
- Create a strong, broad physical and vocal range
- Experience being an active listener, offering pitches and support
- View and discuss the history of seminal artists including:  
George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Bob Newhart, Eddie Murphy, Maria Bamford, Chris Rock, Rita Rudner, Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, Amy Schumer, Robin Williams, Sarah Silverman, Paula Poundstone, Wanda Sykes, Jerry Seinfeld, Zack Galifianakis, Louis C.K., Mitch Hedberg, Groucho Marx, Dave Chapelle, Don Rickles, Roseanne Barr (& more)

### **Proposed Objectives (Cont'd)**

- Learn to identify style, structure, point of view and persona in the work we admire
- Produce a showcase of work

### **Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

*Born Standing Up* by Steve Martin

*The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels and the History of American Comedy* by Kliph Nesteroff

*Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life and Comedy* by Judd Apatow

Punchline (movie, 1988)

Various stand up clips to be viewed and discussed in class

### **Recommended reading**

*Poking a Dead Frog: Conversations with Today's Top Comedy Writers* by Mike Sacks

*How To Succeed in Business Without Really Crying* by Carol Leifer

*Funny on Purpose: The Definitive Guide to an Unpredictable Career in Comedy: Standup + Improv + Sketch + TV + Writing + Directing + YouTube* By Joe Randazzo

### **Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Exercises and Assignments:**

***Grades are not dictated by*** the success of comedy presentations or the instructor's subjective opinion of talent and artistic preference.

#### ***Grades are dictated by:***

Points. Each aspect of class has a point value: participation, exercises, assignments, presentations, Midterm and Final. I provide one make-up option per semester. If you miss an exercise, assignment or presentation, you may make it up by April 28<sup>th</sup>, 11:59pm.

#### **Participation:**

- No more than 15% of your final grade may be based on participation
- In class active student analysis and commentary on presented materials such as text and video clips
- Constructive feedback on classmates' comedy presentations
- Willingness to experiment and apply the constructive feedback of instructor and other students to one's own presentations
- If a student misses a class or is late, they will lose the participation point for that day

#### **Exercises and assignments:**

- Due to the performance aspect of stand up comedy, exercises and homework assignments will be presented in class, no electronic submissions accepted
- Student invests fully, striving to make a connection with the crowd and improve over time
- If a student misses an exercise or assignment, student accepts that they will lose points which will impact their grade

#### **Presentations:**

- Student prepares and presents certain assignments in class, no electronic submissions accepted
- If a student misses a presentation, student accepts that they will lose points that will impact their grade

**Midterm (March 3<sup>rd</sup>):**

- The Midterm presentation is worth 12 points
- The Midterm is presented in class with no paper component, no electronic submission of presentation accepted
- If you miss the Midterm, you lose 12 points, which will impact your grade

**Final (May 8<sup>th</sup>):**

- The Final is worth 15 points, no part of the Final may be submitted electronically
- Attendance at the Final is mandatory and you must be on time
- Being late to the final will cost you 7 points and will affect your grade
- The Final has a paper component worth 8 points, due at the beginning of the final period
- Printing problems happen during finals week. Printing problems are not my problem, please plan ahead. No late papers accepted and no electronic submissions accepted.
- Not handing in a paper will result in a loss of 8 points, which will impact your grade
- The Final has a reflection component worth 3 points
- The Final has a performance component worth 4 points
- You must be on time and you must hand in a printed, stapled paper

**Make-up option:**

- You may make up 6 points (by April 28<sup>th</sup>, 11:59pm) by attending an Open Mic off campus
- You must audio record your set and photograph the space, video will count as both
- You must submit both items AND a reflection on the experience via email to the class
- Technical difficulties will result in a loss of points. Each component is 2 points.
- Make-up points cannot take you over 100 points. 100 points is the maximum.

**Grading Points Breakdown:**

• Week 1 in-class exercise.....	2 points
• Week 2 in-class exercise.....	3 points
• Week 3 in-class write/get up exercise.....	5 points
• Week 4 assignment, Personal Stories.....	6 points
• Week 5 in-class write/get up exercise.....	5 points
• Week 6 assignment, Joke Styles.....	7 points
• Week 7 assignment, 10 Jokes.....	6 points
• MID-TERM: Critical Analysis, Established Comedian.....	12 points
• Week 9 assignment, Set First Draft.....	6 points
• Week 10 assignment, Set Second Draft.....	6 points
• Week 11 in-class exercise.....	5 points
• Week 12 in-class exercise.....	5 points
• Week 13 assignment: Polished Set.....	6 points
• Week 14 assignment: Stand Up Rehearsal.....	6 points
• Week 15 assignment: "Free Play".....	5 points
• FINAL: Paper Due: Critical Analysis, Self.....	15 points
<b>TOTAL.....</b>	<b>100 points</b>

### Grading Scale:

**Excellent:** A (4) = 100-96; A- (3.7) = 95-90

**Good:** B+ (3.3) = 89-86; B (3) = 85-84; B- (2.7) = 83-80

**Average:** C+ (2.3) = 79-76; C (2) = 75-74; C- (1.7) = 73-70

**Poor:** D (.7-1.3) = 60's

**Fail:** F (0) = 59 and below

### Further Grading Notes:

- If the GPA falls between two grades, the final grade will be weighted toward the positive end of the scale for students with excellent/good attendance & class participation and toward the negative end of the scale for those with average/poor attendance & participation.
- If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W. I will be happy to discuss your work at any time.

### Assignment Submission Policy

Written assignments will be collected at the beginning of each class.

Assignments for presentation will be performed during class.

### ATTENDANCE:

#### Absences:

Developing stand up material and style depends on consistent writing (usually as homework) and "getting up" (performing in class). Each class helps you build and refine material over time. **No absences are allowed. Points awarded for performing your stand up material in class/being an active, supportive audience member will be lost.** No percentage of a final grade may be based on attendance only.

#### Tardiness:

We have a large class and everyone gets up each class. When you are late it is disruptive and unprofessional. Class starts at 10am. **If you arrive after 10am you will automatically lose your participation point for the day and are put at the end of the running order and may not get up, depending on time. If you do not get up, you lose those performance points as well.** This is especially impactful on classes that have more points, such as the Joke Styles class and Midterm, for example. If you do not get up, you will lose all the points for that day. I will make note of the time you came in and take the late people in the order they arrived. Please do not be late to class. Everyone who comes to class on time will get up. Anyone who is late may or may not get up, depending on time. I end the performance portion of class to give homework at 12:40. If you are late, do not expect to get up, especially after this time.

### Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Text in **bold** indicates **assignment requiring preparation**.

WEEK	CLASS CONTENT
<i>(This timeline is subject to change depending on the dynamics, pace and unpredictability of the creative process of any given class.)</i>	
1	Warm-up, introductions and discussion of syllabus/contract In-class exercise and stage time
2	A guide to the writing stages: Write, get up, record, evaluate, rewrite Class conversation on the practice, habits and tools of stand up comedy In-class exercise and stage time

<b>WEEK</b>	<b>CLASS CONTENT (Cont'd)</b>
<b>3</b>	Stand Up Comedy as balm, shield or sword: Bravery in comedy Class conversation and clips, in-class writing exercise and "stage time" <i>Homework: prepare personal story due class 4</i>
<b>4</b>	<b>First assignment* - Personal stories</b> Students perform three minutes of true, personal stories <i>Reading Assignment: TBA</i>
<b>5</b>	Anger in comedy: Bend it, don't break it Class discussion, in-class writing exercise and stage time <i>Homework: research assigned joke style to present in class 6</i> <i>(One-Liner, physical, confessional, observational, political, etc.)</i>
<b>6</b>	<b>Second assignment* - Jokes: What are they?</b> Present assigned joke style given in class 5 Definition, history, use, opinion and write/deliver 3 examples <i>Homework: bring in 10 of your own jokes, any style due class 7</i>
<b>7</b>	<b>Third assignment* - 10 Jokes</b> Students perform 10 of their own jokes, any style Plus, Individuality: Point of View and Stage Persona Class discussion on the use of rhythm, timing, wit, physicality and themes Assessment of student's POV and stage persona <i>Homework: Pick comic and work on mid-term paper due class 8</i>
<b>8</b>	<b>Mid-term** - Critical Analysis</b> Written paper and presentation due, focusing on one particular comedian, analyzing and critiquing their material, point of view, persona, work habits and career <i>Homework: work on first set due class 9</i>
<b>9</b>	<b>Fourth assignment* - first set</b> Students bring in 3 minutes of best "bits" from weeks 1-7, creating a "set" <i>Homework: Evaluate first set and bring in second set due class 10</i>
<b>10</b>	<b>Fifth assignment* - second set</b> Students evaluate and re-write first set, presenting second set May include new material <i>Homework: study examples of crowd work</i>
<b>11</b>	Performance technique: Crowd Work and Improvising Survival skills that lead to confidence and flexibility In-class discussion, exercise and stage time <i>Homework: study examples of heckling</i>
<b>12</b>	Performance technique: Heckling Survival skills that lead to confidence and flexibility In-class discussion, exercise and stage time <i>Homework: bring in polished 3.5-minute set to present in class 13</i> <i>Receive name for student "switch up", presented during Final</i>
<b>13</b>	<b>Sixth assignment* - polished set</b> Students debut their first attempt at a 3.5-minute polished comedy set Must choose from material presented in classes 1-12 <i>Homework: continue adjusting and improving set for rehearsal in class 14</i>

<b>WEEK</b>	<b>CLASS CONTENT (Cont'd)</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Seventh Assignment - Final Stand Up rehearsal and run through, with hosts</b> The routine returns in an advanced form, receiving feedback and notes Emphasis on beginning and ending, handling "mistakes", costume, etc. <i>Homework: Making adjustments from show, bring in new and improved set</i> <i>Or bring in spare jokes you never got to and present either in class 15</i>
<b>15</b>	<b>Eighth Assignment - Re-Write or Free Play</b> Students present "ultimate" set or spare jokes <i>Homework: write self-assessment</i> <i>Prepare 90-second student "switch up"</i>
<b>16</b>	<b>Final*** Critical Analysis</b> <i>Monday, May 8<sup>th</sup> 8-10am, PED 208</i> Written paper due, self-assessing the student's overall progress through the class; including personal challenges, strengths, weaknesses and victories Two pages, single-spaced and stapled No emailed or late papers accepted One-minute student "switch up" No late admittance

### **Class Show Date**

Stand Up Comedy performance at Westside Comedy Theater in Santa Monica

Choose one:

Tuesday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 6:30-8pm (meeting at 6pm)

Thursday, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 6:30-8pm (meeting at 6pm)

### **KEY DATES:**

Monday, January 9: Spring semester classes begin

Friday, January 27: Last day to drop this class without a "W" or to select "P/NP"

Friday, February 24: Last day to change "P/NP" to letter grade

Sunday – Sunday, March 12-19: Spring Recess, no classes

Friday, April 7: Last day to drop this class with a mark of "W"

Friday, April 28: Spring semester classes end

Saturday – Tuesday, April 29-May 2: Study days

Wednesday – Wednesday, May 3-10: Final exams

Thursday, May 11: Spring semester ends

Friday, May 12: Commencement

### **Additional Notes:**

- *Except for water, no food or drinks are allowed in class at any time.*

**Welcome to Introduction to Stand Up Comedy! It is my pleasure and privilege to get to know each of you through our collaborative and creative exploration and especially, your jokes. Let's have some fun!**

**Judith Shelton**

### **Academic Conduct**

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the Department of Public Safety <http://capsnet.usc.edu/departments/departments-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Center for Women and Men <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

### **Support Systems**

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs [http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

### **Statement for Students with Disabilities**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP: [http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html), (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) [ability@usc.edu](mailto:ability@usc.edu).

### **Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one’s own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another’s work as one’s own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCampus, the Student Guidebook, ([www.usc.edu/scampus](http://www.usc.edu/scampus) or <http://scampus.usc.edu>) contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

### **Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis**

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.