

# USC School of Dramatic Arts

**THTR 474 Intro to Stand Up Comedy**  
**Fall 2017—Fridays—10am to 12:50pm**  
**Location: MCC 111**

**Instructor: Judith Shelton**

**Office: MCC 111**

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

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

## **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 the human connection through comedy.

## **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 six basic stages of stand up comedy: write, “get up”, record, evaluate, re-write, get back up
- 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 crowd work, handle heckling, 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 set 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, speech patterns, 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, 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, Phyllis Diller (& 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 December 1st, 11:59pm.

#### **Participation:**

- No more than 15% of your final grade may be based on participation
- In-class active student analysis of 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 is late or has to leave early, 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 have missed their opportunity to perform and 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 which will impact their grade

**Midterm:**

- The Midterm presentation is worth 14 points
- The Midterm is presented in class with no paper component
- No electronic submission of presentation accepted
- If you miss the Midterm, you lose 14 points, which will greatly impact your grade

**Final:**

- 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, and should be two pages, double-spaced, name on each page, and stapled.
- Printing problems happen during finals week. Printing problems are not my problem, please plan ahead. No late papers or 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 December 1st, 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 email both items AND a reflection on the experience to the entire class and me
- 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

**Points Breakdown:**

• Week 1 in-class exercise.....	2 points
• Week 2 in-class write/get up exercise.....	3 points
• Week 3 assignment, Personal Stories.....	5 points
• Week 4 in-class write/get up exercise.....	4 points
• Week 5 assignment, Joke Styles.....	6 points
• Week 6 assignment, 10 Jokes.....	10 points
• MIDTERM: Critical Analysis, Established Comedian.....	14 points
• Week 8 assignment, First Set.....	6 points
• Week 9 in-class exercise, Crowd Work.....	5 points
• Week 10 assignment, Second Set.....	6 points
• Week 11 in-class exercise, Heckling.....	5 points
• Week 12 assignment: Polished Set.....	7 points
• Week 13 assignment: Stand Up Show Rehearsal.....	7 points
• Week 14 assignment: "Talent Show" .....	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, no electronic submissions. Assignments for presentation will be performed during class, no electronic submissions.

### 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 so you must come to class prepared and ready to participate.

#### **Tardiness/leaving early:**

We have a large class and everyone gets up each class. When you are late or leave early it is unprofessional, disruptive, and unsupportive. Class is 10am to 12:50pm. **If you arrive after 10am or inform me you need to leave before 12:50pm you will 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 all the points for the day.** This is especially impactful on classes that have more points, such as the Joke Styles class, 10 Jokes class and Midterm, for example. I will make note of the time you came in and take the late/leaving early people in the order they arrived. Everyone who comes to class on time and stays the duration will get up. Anyone who is late/leaving early may or may not get up, depending on time. I typically end the performance portion of class to give homework at 12:40pm. If you are in the "work in" group, do not expect to get up after this time.

### Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

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

#### **WEEK**

#### **CLASS CONTENT**

*(This timeline is subject to change depending on the dynamics, pace and unpredictability of the creative process of any given class.)*

**1**

Warm-up, introductions and discussion of syllabus (our contract)

An introduction to the practice, habits and tools of stand up comedy

A guide to the writing phases: Write, get up, record, evaluate, rewrite, get up

In-class improvised exercise and stage time

<b>WEEK</b>	<b>CLASS CONTENT (Cont'd)</b>
<b>2</b>	Stand up comedy as sword, shield or balm: Bravery in comedy Class conversation and clips How to write for stand up In-class writing exercise and stage time <i>Homework: prepare personal story due class 3</i>
<b>3</b>	<b>First assignment* - Personal stories</b> Students perform three minutes of true, personal stories <i>Reading Assignment: Born Standing Up by Steve Martin</i>
<b>4</b>	Anger in comedy: Bend it, don't break it Class conversation and clips In-class writing exercise and stage time <i>Homework: research assigned joke style to present in class 5 (One-Liner, physical, confessional, observational, political, etc.)</i>
<b>5</b>	<b>Second assignment* - Joke Styles</b> Present assigned joke style given in class 4 Definition, history, use, classic example, and write/deliver 3 original examples <i>Homework: bring in 10 of your own jokes, any style due class 6</i>
<b>6</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 Individual student POV and persona will be explored in class 8 <i>Homework: receive comic and work on Midterm presentation due class 7</i>
<b>7</b>	<b>Midterm** - Critical Analysis</b> Presentation due focusing on your particular assigned comedian, analyzing and critiquing their material, point of view, persona, work habits, career and legacy <i>Homework: work on first set due class 8</i>
<b>8</b>	<b>Fourth assignment* - First Set</b> Students bring in 3 minutes of best "bits" from weeks 1-6, creating a "set" Assessment of each student's POV and stage persona <i>Homework: study examples of crowd work for discussion in class 9 Evaluate and re-write first set, second set due class 10</i>
<b>9</b>	Performance technique: Crowd Work and Improvising Survival skills that lead to confidence and flexibility In-class discussion, exercise and stage time <i>Homework: evaluate and re-write first set, bring in second set due class 10</i>
<b>10</b>	<b>Fifth assignment* - Second Set</b> Students present second set May include new material <i>Homework: study examples of heckling for discussion in class 11 Evaluate and re-write second set, polished set due class 12</i>
<b>11</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 12</i>

<b>WEEK</b>	<b>CLASS CONTENT (Cont'd)</b>
<b>12</b>	<p><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 1-11  <i>Homework: continue adjusting and improving set for rehearsal in class 13</i>  <i>Begin to study your assigned student for the "switch up" during the Final</i></p>
<b>13</b>	<p><b>Seventh Assignment - 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: prepare for talent show in class 14. Stand up, music, dance, improv, crafts, poetry, puppets, clowning, games, etc.!</i></p>
<b>14</b>	<p><b>Eighth Assignment - Talent Show</b>            Students present ultimate set (their "tight 3") OR random nuttiness/beauty  <i>Homework: write self-assessment</i>  <i>Prepare 90-second student "switch up"</i></p>
<b>15</b>	<p><b>Final*** Critical Analysis</b>  <i>Monday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 8-10am, PED 208 (room subject to change)</i>            Written paper due, self-assessing the student's overall progress through the class;            including personal challenges, strengths, weaknesses and victories            Two pages, double-spaced, name on each page and stapled            90-second student "switch up"            No emailed or late papers accepted, no late admittance</p>

### **Class Show Date**

Stand up comedy showcase at Westside Comedy Theater in Santa Monica

Choose one:

Tuesday, November 28<sup>th</sup>, 6:30-8pm (meeting at 6pm)

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

### **KEY DATES:**

Monday, August 21: Fall semester classes begin

Friday, September 8: Last day to drop this class without a "W" or to select "P/NP"

Friday, October 6: Last day to change "P/NP" to letter grade

Friday, November 10: Last day to drop this class with a mark of "W"

Wednesday – Sunday, November 22-26: Thanksgiving Recess, no classes

Friday, December 1: Fall semester classes end

Saturday – Tuesday, December 2-5: Study days

Wednesday – Wednesday, December 6-13: Final exams

Thursday, December 14: Fall semester ends

### **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 do good work, risk a little, support each other and 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/department/department-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).

### **Title IX**

Harassment, sexual misconduct, interpersonal violence, and stalking are not tolerated by the university. All faculty and most staff are considered Responsible Employees by the university and must forward all information they receive about these types of situations to the Title IX Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator is responsible for assisting students with supportive accommodations, including academic accommodations, as well as investigating these incidents if the reporting student wants an investigation. If you need academic accommodations you may contact the Title IX Coordinator directly ([titleix@usc.edu](mailto:titleix@usc.edu) or [213-821-8298](tel:213-821-8298)) without sharing any personal information with me. If you would like to speak with a confidential counselor, Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) provides 24/7 confidential support for students ([213-740-4900](tel:213-740-4900); press 0 after hours).

**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.