

# USC School of Dramatic Arts

**THTR 474 Intro to Stand Up Comedy**  
**Spring 2018—Fridays—2pm to 4:50pm**  
**Location: MCC 112**

**Instructor: Judith Shelton**

**Office: MCC 112**

**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
- Practice the basic stages of stand up: 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.
- Distinguish between persona and character
- Create a strong, broad physical and vocal range
- Experience being an active listener, offering “pitches” and support
- View and discuss the history, style and contributions of seminal artists
- 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**

*I Can't Make This Up: Life Lessons* by Kevin Hart

*Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* by Steve Martin

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

Various stand up clips to be viewed and discussed in class

## **Recommended reading**

*Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* by Mason Currey

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

*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 or sense of humor.

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

Points. Each aspect of class has a point value: participation, exercises, assignments, presentations, Midterm and Final. I provide options to make up 8 points total per semester. Details listed under "Make-Up Options".

#### **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 leaves early, they will lose their participation point for that day

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

- Due to the live 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 (stage time) 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 12 points
- The Midterm is presented in class with no paper component
- No electronic submission of presentation accepted, except video link component
- If you miss the Midterm, you lose 12 points, which will greatly impact your grade
- The policy for tardiness/leaving early (pg. 4) applies to the Midterm, as well

**Final:**

- The Final is worth 15 points, no part of the Final may be submitted electronically
- Attendance at the Final is mandatory (options available in the case of a conflicting Final)
- 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 full 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

**Make-up options:**

- If you miss an exercise, assignment or presentation, you may make up 8 points, total, by Friday, April 27<sup>th</sup> at 11:59pm.
- You may make up 6 points by doing an open mic or booked show, OFF CAMPUS ONLY
- You may make up 8 points warming up the audience at USC Comedy Live at Zemeckis
- You must audio record your set and photograph the space, video will count as both
- You must email both items AND a paragraph on the experience to the entire class, and me
- Technical/email/link issues will result in a loss of points, double check your submission
- You may make up 1 point by switching sections, if there is room available for you that day
- Make-up points cannot take you over 100 points, 100 points is the maximum

**Points Breakdown:**

• Week 1, in-class improvised exercise.....	1 point
• Week 2, in-class write/get up exercise.....	2 points
• Week 3, 1 <sup>st</sup> assignment, Personal Stories.....	5 points
• Week 4, in-class write/get up exercise.....	4 points
• Week 5, 2 <sup>nd</sup> assignment, Joke Styles.....	6 points
• Week 6, 3 <sup>rd</sup> assignment, 10 Jokes.....	10 points
• MIDTERM: Critical Analysis, Established Comedian.....	12 points
• Week 8, 4 <sup>th</sup> assignment, First Set.....	6 points
• Week 9, in-class exercise, Crowd Work.....	5 points
• Week 10, 5 <sup>th</sup> assignment, Second Set.....	6 points
• Week 11, in-class exercise, Heckling.....	5 points
• Week 12, 6 <sup>th</sup> assignment: Clean Set.....	6 points
• Week 13, 7 <sup>th</sup> assignment: Polished Set, 1 <sup>st</sup> Show Rehearsal	7 points
• Week 14, 8 <sup>th</sup> assignment: Final Set, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Show Rehearsal....	7 points
• Week 15, 9 <sup>th</sup> assignment: "Talent Show" .....	3 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 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. Names are picked “lottery” style. When you are late or leave early it is unprofessional, disruptive, and unsupportive. Committing to this class means being here from 2pm to 4:50pm. **If you arrive after 2pm you will lose your participation point for the day. Students arriving late are put at the end of the lottery and may not get up, depending on time. I take the late people last, in the order they arrived. Students choosing to leave early lose their participation point and risk not getting picked before they have to leave. If you do not get up before you leave, you lose all the points for the day.** This is especially impactful on classes that have more points, such as the 10 Jokes class and Midterm, for example. I end class at 4:40pm to give homework. 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 and running order. Make the choice each day to be in class on time and stay.

### 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.)*

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| <b>1</b> | Warm-up, introductions and discussion of syllabus (our contract)<br>Introduction to the tools of our trade: Mic, stand, recording device<br>A guide to the writing phases: Write, get up, record, evaluate, rewrite, get up<br>In-class improvised exercise and stage time |
| <b>2</b> | Stand up comedy as sword, shield or balm: Bravery in comedy<br>Class conversation and clips<br>How to write for stand up<br>In-class writing exercise and stage time<br><i>Homework: prepare personal story due class 3</i>  |
| <b>3</b> | <b>First assignment* - Personal stories</b><br>Students perform 2-3 minutes of true, personal stories<br><i>Reading Assignment: I Can't Make This Up: Life Lessons by Kevin Hart</i>   |

<b>WEEK</b>	<b>CLASS CONTENT (Cont'd)</b>
4	<p>Anger in comedy: Bend it, don't break it</p> <p>Class conversation and clips</p> <p>In-class writing exercise and stage time</p> <p><i>Homework: research assigned joke style to present in class 5 (One-Liner, physical, confessional, observational, political, etc.)</i></p>
5	<p><b>Second assignment* - Joke Styles</b></p> <p>Present assigned joke style given in class 4, in 3 minutes</p> <p>Definition, history, use, classic example, and write/deliver 3 original examples</p> <p><i>Homework: bring in 10 of your own jokes, any style due class 6</i></p>
6	<p><b>Third assignment* - 10 Jokes</b></p> <p>Students perform 10 of their own jokes, any style, in 3 minutes</p> <p>Plus, Individuality: Point of View and Stage Persona</p> <p>Clips and discussion on the use of rhythm, timing, wit, physicality and themes</p> <p>Individual student POV and persona will be explored in class 8</p> <p><i>Homework: receive comic and work on Midterm presentation due class 7</i></p>
7	<p><b>Midterm** - Critical Analysis of Established Comic</b></p> <p>Presentation due focusing on your particular assigned comedian, analyzing and critiquing their material, point of view, persona, work habits, career and legacy</p> <p><i>Homework: work on first set due class 8</i></p>
8	<p><b>Fourth assignment* - First Set</b></p> <p>Students bring in 2 minutes of best "bits" from weeks 1-6, creating a "set"</p> <p>Assessment of each student's POV and stage persona</p> <p><i>Homework: study examples of crowd work for discussion in class 9</i></p> <p><i>Evaluate and re-write first set, second set due class 10</i></p>
9	<p>Performance technique: Crowd Work and Improvising</p> <p>Survival skills that lead to confidence and flexibility</p> <p>In-class discussion, exercise and stage time</p> <p><i>Homework: bring in second set due class 10</i></p>
10	<p><b>Fifth assignment* - Second Set</b></p> <p>Students present second set, 2-3 minutes</p> <p>May include new material</p> <p><i>Homework: study examples of heckling for discussion in class 11</i></p> <p><i>Evaluate and re-write second set, polished set due class 13</i></p>
11	<p>Performance technique: Heckling</p> <p>Survival skills that lead to confidence and flexibility</p> <p>In-class discussion, exercise and stage time</p> <p><i>Homework: bring in clean 3-minute set to present in class 12</i></p>
12	<p><b>Sixth assignment* - "Clean" Set</b></p> <p>Network television, certain shows and benefits require clean material</p> <p>Students present 2-3 minutes of clean material</p> <p><i>Homework: bring in 3-minute polished set to present in class 13</i></p>
13	<p><b>Seventh assignment* - "Polished" Set, Rehearsal with Hosts</b></p> <p>Students debut their first attempt at a 3-minute polished comedy set</p> <p>Must choose from material presented in classes 1-12</p> <p><i>Homework: continue adjusting and improving set for rehearsal in class 14</i></p> <p><i>Begin to study your assigned student for the "switch up" during the Final</i></p>

<b>WEEK</b>	<b>CLASS CONTENT (Cont'd)</b>
<b>14</b>	<p><b>Eighth assignment* - "Final" Set, Rehearsal with Hosts</b></p> <p>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 15. Stand up, music, dance, improv, crafts, poetry, puppets, clowning, games, sketch, life hacks, etcetera!</i></p>
<b>15</b>	<p><b>Ninth assignment* - Talent Show</b></p> <p>Students present ultimate set (their "Tight 3") OR random nuttiness/beauty  <i>Homework: write self-assessment and prepare 60-second student "switch up"</i></p>
<b>16</b>	<p><b>Final*** - Critical Analysis</b></p> <p><i>Monday, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2-4pm, MCC 112 (room subject to change)</i></p> <p>Written paper due, self-assessing the student's overall progress through the class;  including personal challenges, strengths, weaknesses and victories  Two full pages, double-spaced, name on each page, and stapled  60-second student "switch up"  No emailed or late papers accepted  No late admittance/leaving early except in the rare case of a conflicting final</p>

### **Class Show Dates**

USC stand up comedy showcases at Westside Comedy Theater in Santa Monica

You must be at one of the two rehearsal classes to participate in the show

You may sign up for one show:

Monday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 6:30-8pm (meeting at 6pm)

Tuesday, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 6:30-8pm (meeting at 6pm)

Thursday, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 6:30-8pm (meeting at 6pm)

### **KEY DATES:**

Monday, January 8: Spring semester classes begin

Friday, January 26: Last day to add/drop this class without a "W" or to select "P/NP"

Friday, February 23: Last day to change "P/NP" to letter grade or withdraw without a "W"

Sunday – Sunday, March 11-18: Spring Recess, no classes

Friday, April 6: Last day to drop this class with a mark of "W"

Friday, April 27: Spring semester classes end

Saturday – Tuesday, April 28-May 1: Study days

Wednesday – Wednesday, May 2-9: Final exams

Wednesday, May 9: Spring semester ends

Friday, May 11: Commencement

### **Additional Notes:**

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

**Welcome to Introduction to Stand Up Comedy, dear students! It is a true joy and privilege to get to know each of you through our collaborative and creative exploration and especially, your jokes. Let's do good work, endeavor to know ourselves better, risk a little, support each other, make lasting friendships, and laugh through it all!**

**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.