

**THTR 474 Intro to Standup Comedy**  
Spring 2020—Fridays—10am to 12:50pm  
Location: MCC 112  
Units: 2

**Instructor: Judith Shelton**  
**Office: MCC 214 or mutually agreed upon UPC location**  
**Office Hours: 12:55-1:55pm Fridays, by appointment**  
**Contact Info: judiths@usc.edu – Mon. - Fri. (9am-5pm)**  
**626.390.3678 - Fridays (9am-5pm text only)**

### **Course Description and Overview**

This course will offer a specific look at the art of Standup Comedy and serve as a laboratory for creating original standup material: 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 standup 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 standup 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**

- To get familiar with a comic’s tools: notebook, mic and stand, “the light”, recording device
- To learn how to write for standup comedy
- To practice the basic stages of standup: write, “get up”, record, evaluate, re-write, get back up
- To examine elements of a joke: set up, punch, tags, toppers, callbacks
- To develop jokes, bits, chunks, sets, ultimately creating your act
- To take the stage with confidence, flexibility and a sense of play
- To develop an awareness of audience feedback using sight and sound
- To improvise in the moment, utilize crowd work, handle heckling, edit on the spot
- To review what works and why, what does not work and why
- To participate in constant, constructive evaluation of work
- To listen to and critique recordings, re-write material as needed, adding tags, adjusting order, cutting, etc.
- To investigate the concept of “writing onstage” vs. taking the stage with a set script
- To build a strong sense of your own point of view
- To explore your own comedy persona using physicality, personality, voice, repetition of themes, tempo, speech patterns, etc.
- To distinguish between persona and character
- To create a strong, broad, physical and vocal range
- To experience being an active listener, offering “pitches” and support
- To view and discuss the history, style and contributions of seminal artists
- To learn to identify style, structure, point of view, and persona in the work we admire
- To produce a showcase of work

## **Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

*Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* by Steve Martin (Audiobook encouraged)

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

Various standup clips to be viewed and discussed in class

## **Recommended Reading**

*Dear Girls: Intimate Tales, Untold Secrets & Advice for Living Your Best life* by Ali Wong (Audiobook encouraged)

*I Can't Make This Up: Life Lessons* by Kevin Hart (Audiobook encouraged)

*Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* by Mason Currey

*Comedy Writing for Late-Night TV* by Joe Toplyn

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

*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". Auditing students observe but do not participate.

### **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:**

- All presentations are given in class, no electronic submissions accepted
- If a student misses a presentation, student accepts that they will lose valuable points

### **Midterm:**

- The Midterm presentation is worth 15 points presented in class with no paper component
- No electronic submission of presentation accepted, except video link requirement
- If you miss the Midterm, you lose 15 points, which will greatly impact your grade
- The policy for tardiness/leaving early (pg. 4) applies to the Midterm, as well
- No phones or computers, but you may hold notes

**Final:**

- The Final is a paper worth 15 points, due by the end of the 2-hour Final period, and should be two full pages, double-spaced, name on each page, and stapled.
- The Final may not be submitted electronically, it must be handed in.
- 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 15 points, which will impact your grade.

**Make-up options:**

- If you miss an exercise, assignment or presentation, you may make up 8 points, total, by Friday, May 1<sup>st</sup> at 11:59pm. No submissions accepted after this day and time.
- You may make up 8 points by doing a non-USC open mic or booked show, OFF CAMPUS.
- You may make up 6 points by doing an open mic or booked show ON CAMPUS.
- You must audio record your set and photograph the space, video will count as both.
- You must post both items AND a paragraph (at least 4 sentences) on the experience to the entire class, and me, via a specific blog on Blackboard that I will create.
- Technical/posting issues will result in a loss of points, leave time to figure it out.
- You may make up 1 point by switching sections, if there is room available that day.
- You may make up 2 points by watching a live stand up show and sending a picture and paragraph (at least 4 sentences) to the entire class via the Blackboard blog.
- Make-up points cannot take you over 100 points, 100 points is the maximum

<b>Exercises and Assignments</b>	<b>Points</b>	<b>% of Grade</b>
Week 1, in-class improvised exercise	1	1
Week 2, in-class improvised exercise	1	1
Week 3, in-class write/get up exercise	3	3
Week 4, 1 <sup>st</sup> assignment: Joke Styles	6	6
Week 5, 2 <sup>nd</sup> assignment: 10 Jokes	10	10
Week 6, 3 <sup>rd</sup> assignment: First Set	7	7
Week 7, in-class exercise, Crowd Work	5	5
MIDTERM Presentation: Critical Analysis, Established Comedian	15	15
Week 9, One-on-One meetings with me	1	1
Week 10, 5 <sup>th</sup> assignment: Second Set	7	7
Week 11, in-class exercise, Heckling	5	5
Week 12, in-class exercise: Clean Set	5	5
Week 13, 6 <sup>th</sup> assignment: Polished Set, 1 <sup>st</sup> Show Rehearsal	7	7
Week 14, 7 <sup>th</sup> assignment: Final Set, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Show Rehearsal	7	7
Week 15, 8 <sup>th</sup> assignment: Plan of Attack and "Switch Sets"	5	5
FINAL: Paper Due: Critical Analysis, Self	15	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</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, April 3<sup>rd</sup>. I will discuss your work at any time.
- Auditing students attend class strictly as an observer and will not participate.

### Assignment Submission Policy

This is a performance class, no electronic submissions of papers, presentations or exercises.

### 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. **Be advised, no absences are excused in this class, regardless of reason. Points awarded for performing your stand up material in class/being an active, supportive audience member will be lost.**

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

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 10am to 12:50pm. **If you arrive after 10am 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.** Be mindful of days that have more points, such as the 10 Jokes class and Midterm. I end class at 12:40pm 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. If you are not in class for the homework do not contact me, refer to this syllabus. Make the choice to be in class on time, and stay.

### Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

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

*(This timeline is subject to change depending on the dynamics, pace and unpredictability of the creative process of any given class. Being in class ensures you are aware of any changes.)*

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings and Homework	Deliverable/ Due Dates
<b>Week 1</b>	Warm-up, introductions, discussion of syllabus (our contract) Introduction to the tools of our trade: Mic, stand, recording device A guide to the writing phases: Write, get up, record, evaluate, rewrite, get up In-class improvised exercise and stage time	<b><i>Begin reading/listening to: Born Standing Up</i></b>	Re-write your jokes and compile them to build your show set.
<b>Week 2</b>	Standup comedy as sword, shield or balm: Bravery in comedy Class conversation and clips In-class improvised exercise and stage time How to write for stand up	<b><i>Continue reading: Born Standing Up</i></b>	Re-write your jokes and compile them to build your show set.

<b>Week 3</b>	Anger in comedy: Bend it, don't break it Class conversation and clips In-class writing exercise and stage time	<b>Homework:</b> <b>Research assigned joke style to present in class</b>	<b>Due week 4</b> <b>Feb. 7, 2020</b>
<b>Week 4</b>	<b>First assignment* - Joke Styles</b> Present assigned joke style given in class 3 3 minutes, max. Definition, history, use, classic example, etc. Write/deliver 3 original jokes in that style	<b>Homework:</b> <b>Deliver 10 original jokes, in any joke style</b>	<b>Due week 5</b> <b>Feb. 14, 2020</b>
<b>Week 5</b>	<b>Second assignment* - 10 Jokes</b> Students perform 10 original jokes, any style 3 minutes, max.	<b>Homework:</b> <b>Work on first set</b>	<b>Due week 6</b> <b>Feb, 21, 2020</b>
<b>Week 6</b>	<b>Third assignment* - First Set</b> Students bring in 2 minutes, max, of best "bits" from weeks 1-5, creating a "set" Individuality: Point of View and Stage Persona Clips and discussion on the use of rhythm, timing, wit, physicality and themes	<b>Begin reading:</b> <b>The Comedians</b> <b>Homework:</b> <b>study examples of crowd work for discussion</b>	<b>Discussion and exercise</b> <b>week 7</b> <b>Feb. 28, 2020</b>
<b>Week 7</b>	Performance technique: Crowd Work and Improvising Survival skills that lead to confidence and flexibility In-class discussion, exercise and stage time	<b>Homework:</b> <b>Receive comic and prepare Midterm presentation</b>	<b>Due week 8</b> <b>March 6, 2020</b>
<b>Week 8</b> <b>MIDTERM</b>	<b>Midterm*</b> <b>Critical Analysis of Established Comic</b> No phones allowed on stage during presentation, notecards OK Presentation of assigned comedian, analyzing and critiquing their material, influences, POV, persona, work habits, career, legacy, etc.	Make appt. to meet me for One-on-one	<b>One-on-One</b> <b>week 9</b> <b>Mar. 13, 2020</b>
<b>Week 9</b>	One-On-One Open House I am available to meet with you personally to look at jokes, help with stage presence, mic use, and discuss any questions or concerns	<b>Homework: work on 2<sup>nd</sup> set 2-3 minutes</b> ALSO: Enjoy your Spring Break <3	<b>Due week 10</b> <b>Mar. 27, 2020</b> Don't overdo it. Remember to take a real break!
<b>Week 10</b>	<b>Fifth assignment* - Second Set</b> Students present second set, 2-3 minutes May include new material Assessment of each student's POV and stage persona	<b>Homework:</b> <b>study examples of heckling for discussion</b>	<b>Discussion and exercise</b> <b>week 11</b> <b>April 3, 2020</b>

<b>Week 11</b>	Performance technique: Heckling Survival skills that lead to confidence and flexibility In-class discussion, exercise and stage time	<b>Homework:</b> <i>Research – What the heck is clean comedy?</i>	<b>Discussion and exercise week 12</b> Apr. 10, 2020
<b>Week 12</b>	<b>In-class exercise: Clean Set</b> Students take existing material and make it “TV Clean”	<b>Homework: work on 3-minute polished set for rehearsal during class time</b>	<b>Due week 13</b> Apr. 17, 2020
<b>Week 13</b>	<b>Sixth assignment*</b> <b>“Polished” Set, First Rehearsal with Hosts</b> Students debut their first attempt at a 3-minute polished comedy set Must choose from material presented in classes 1-12 <b>Receive student for “switch set”</b>	<b>Homework: continue adjusting and improving set for final rehearsal during class time</b>	<b>Due week 14</b> Apr. 24, 2020
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>Seventh assignment*</b> <b>“Final” Set, Second Rehearsal with Hosts</b> The act returns in an advanced, playful form, receiving feedback and notes Emphasis on beginning and ending, handling “mistakes”, nerves, boredom, etc.	<b>Homework: Outline Plan of Attack, and prepare 90-second student “switch up”</b>	<b>Due week 15</b> May 1, 2020 (Last day to submit make up work is also May 1 <sup>st</sup> )
<b>Week 15</b>	<b>Eighth assignment*</b> <b>Plan of Attack and Switch Sets</b> Students discuss how they plan to use their stand up skills going forward Present 90-second “Switch Up Sets”	<b>Homework: write self-assessment Final paper</b>	<b>Due by the end of your Final period</b> May 11, 2020 8-10am
<b>FINAL</b>	<b>Final*</b> <b>Critical Analysis, Self – Paper Due</b> 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 No emailed or late papers accepted		<i>Monday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 8-10am, MCC 112 (room subject to change)</i>

### Class Show Dates

USC Stand Up Comedy Showcases are at Westside Comedy Theater in Santa Monica  
You must be at one of the two rehearsals (class 13 and 14) to **participate** in the show

You must be at both rehearsals (class 13 and 14) to **host** the show

Rules for missing either class rehearsals still apply.

You may sign up for one show: Saturday, April 25, 6-7:30pm (5:30pm call time)  
Tuesday, April 28, 6:30-7:50pm (6pm call time)  
Thursday, April 30, 8-9:30pm (7:30pm call time)

**KEY DATES:**

January 31: Last day to add, or drop this class without a “W”, or to select “P/NP”

February 28: Last day to change “P/NP” to letter grade

March 15-22: Spring recess

April 3: Last day to drop this class with a mark of “W”

May 1: Spring semester classes end

May 2-5: Study days

May 6-13: Final examinations

May 14: Spring semester ends

May 15: Commencement

**Additional Notes:**

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

**Welcome to Introduction to Standup Comedy, dear students! It is my 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, sincere friendships, and laugh through it all!**

**Judith Shelton (Jude)**

**EXTRA-CURRICULAR COMMITMENTS AND ISPS**

Should you choose to participate in any extra-curricular project, such as an Independent Student Production, the SDA administration and faculty will not make allowances or exceptions for absences in class, missed or delayed assignments, home work that is required as preparation for class, or lack of participation in class resulting from your extra-curricular involvement.

**Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems****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 Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). 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>.

**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 for DSP and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) [ability@usc.edu](mailto:ability@usc.edu).

## **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. See the university's site on Campus Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

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### **Support Systems:**

*Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. [engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255*

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu)

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086*

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu)

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

*Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710*

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

*USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime.* Provides overall safety to USC community. [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)