

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 202: The Fundamentals of Comedy
2 Units
Spring 2024 — Tuesdays — 2-4:50pm
Location: MCC 106

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers
Email: kqeggers@usc.edu
Office: JEF 204
Zoom Office: <https://usc.zoom.us/my/kirstin.sda>
Office Hours: By appointment — schedule via email

Course Description

*"Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process
and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind." — E.B. White*

This course lays the foundation for studying the art and craft of comedy, especially the basic concepts of comedic acting, performance, structure, genres and forms. Through readings, viewings, and functional creative exercises, students will learn basic theories and structures of comedy acting, writing, creating, and consuming, and will use these tenets in practice, in a variety of experiential comedy-based projects.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Employ basic comedy techniques in both performance and writing/creation
2. Apply techniques for bravery and collaboration to serve the creative process
3. Evaluate existing comedy material, in a variety of genres
4. Devise varied comedic material, from idea to process to product
5. Further identify and develop their own comedic voices

*"Laugh as much as possible, always laugh. It's the sweetest
thing one can do for oneself and one's fellow human beings." —Maya Angelou*

Course Notes

Due to the collaborative, experiential, and performative nature of comedy, you must attend class live and in-person (medical status withstanding).

You will also be expected to meet and rehearse with your classmates outside of class.

Communication

Please email me at kqeggers@usc.edu any time with questions or concerns. Emails will generally be returned within 48 hours on weekdays. I can also meet with you via my Zoom personal meeting room, or at an on-campus location as schedules allow.

I also ask that the class as a whole have a communication group, platform of your choice, so you can easily get in touch with each other.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Blackboard will be updated regularly with announcements, readings, etc. Please check often. Blackboard help for students is at studentblackboardhelp.usc.edu.

You will occasionally need to print scripts — please be prepared with printing capability.

Required Reading

All readings will be posted on Blackboard or linked via ARES/USC Library. You are not required to purchase any of these books.

Selections from:

- *Ha!: The Science of When We Laugh and Why* by Scott Weems
- *The Comic Toolbox* by John Vorhaus
- *The Comedy Bible* by Judy Carter
- *Comedy for Animators* by Jonathan Lyons
- *The Eight Characters of Comedy* by Scott Sedita
- Additional web links and/or PDFs throughout the semester to read and retain for discussion.

Required Viewing

You are required to watch 15-20+ hours of varied comedic material throughout the semester and reflect on each piece. This translates to approximately 60-80 minutes each week — or one movie, one live comedy show, 3 sitcom episodes, one episode of SNL, 12 online sketches, one or two stand-up specials, etc. Some weeks, the material will be dictated, some weeks the material will be free choice. You are encouraged to watch comedy created by artists both of and outside of your personal identity.

Supplemental Reading

- *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by M. Bruder, L.M. Cohn, M. Olnek, N. Pollack, R. Previto, S. Zigler
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* by Steve Martin
- *On The Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* by Mel Watkins
- *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* by Yael Kohan
- *Why Not Me?* by Mindy Kaling
- *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
- *Poking a Dead Frog* by Mike Sacks

Supplemental Viewing

You are encouraged to watch comedy created by artists both of and outside of your personal identity.

- Current or historical comedy movies of your choice. (Check out essential comedy movie lists on rottentomatoes.com, vulture.com and ranker.com for suggestions)
- Current or historical comedy television of your choice. (Check out essential comedy television lists on rottentomatoes.com, indiewire.com and ranker.com for suggestions). Include non-sitcoms such as sketch shows and late-night.
- Current and historical stand-up specials and albums.
- Documentaries about comedy such as *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, CNN's *The History of Comedy*, *Dying Laughing*, *A Piece of Work*, *The Aristocrats*, *The Muslims Are Coming!*, *Don't F*ck This Up*, etc.
- Comedy-centered podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron*, *Comedy Bang Bang*, *2 Dope Queens*, *Conan O'Brien Needs A Friend*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus*, etc.

"What is comedy? Comedy is the art of making people laugh without making them puke." —Steve Martin

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Below is a general overview of the assignments. A detailed assignment description will be posted on Blackboard with ample time for each assignment.

In-class Activities — *“The answers to making it, to me...center on having a tolerance for delayed gratification, a passion for the craft, and a willingness to fail.” — Ali Wong*

This is an experience based course, and you are expected to participate and commit during every class and activity with a generous heart, a curious mind, and a devoted work ethic. You are not graded on your laughs in this class, you are graded on your attempts (your willingness to fail). Comedy is best learned experientially, and points (2 per class) are awarded for presence, focus, attitude, and willingness.

Comedy Notebook — You will keep a Comedy Notebook (Journal) throughout the course. This will be your personal notebook in which you will record observations, ideas, writing assignments, and reflections on viewed material. It will be reviewed periodically to confirm participation, and will be reviewed in its entirety and turned in in the last week of class.

Your Comedy Notebook interaction is two fold — creative and consumption.

- Creative: you will be given writing assignments weekly as part of your notebook, and you are encouraged to engage with your notebook daily. Creative assignments will often be shared in class.
- Consumption: You will consume (watch/listen) a minimum of one hour of comedy per week and write a short journal recount and response. Comedy mediums should be varied. Some weeks the material will be assigned, some weeks will be your choice.

Personal Comedy Share — Select an existing piece of comedy that feels personal to you, ignites you in some way and makes you laugh out loud. This may be a sketch, scene from movie/tv, stand-up set, written material you read out loud, etc. It should not be something you created. Be prepared to send a link or share your laptop. It should be about 2-5 minutes in length. You will analyze and discuss what draws you to the piece in class.

Open Comedy Scene (Midterm) — Using the parameters of an open scene, and the comedic guidelines learned, actors will work in pairs as assigned by the instructor to create a fully-rehearsed comedic scene. Meetings and rehearsals outside of class are crucial to the success of this project. Outside rehearsals will be discussed in class. A final presentation of each open scene will be scheduled — full costumes, props and overall preparation is mandatory. The written component will analyze and specify all comedic elements used — prompts given in class/on Blackboard.

Final Project — Students will create a final comedy project of their choice. This might be a stand-up set, a sketch, a comedy video, a character reel, a short play, a sitcom script, etc. It should have elements of both writing and performing. It must be pitched, discussed, approved, and rehearsed in class. There may be opportunity for partnership — specifics TBD. It should be created specifically over the course of this semester, not a previous project.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Available Points
In-class Activities – presence, focus, attitude, willingness (2/class)	30
Comedy Notebook – creative & consumption weekly engagement	25
Personal Comedy Material Share	5
Open Comedy Scene Midterm Classwork	5

Assignment	Available Points
Open Comedy Scene Midterm Presentation	10
Open Comedy Scene Written Component	5
Final Project Classwork	5
Final Project Presentation	15
TOTAL	100

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

A = 95-100 pts B+ = 87-89 pts C+ = 77-79 pts D+ = 67-69 pts F = 59 or below
 A- = 90-94 pts B = 83-86 pts C = 73-76 pts D = 63-66 pts
 B- = 80-82 pts C- = 70-72 pts D- = 60-62 pts

Assignment Submission Policy

Performance Assignments are presented in class, and copies of written work do not need to be submitted, although you will refer to your work and must be prepared.

Written assignments should be posted on Blackboard as a PDF attachment before the specified date and time, and should be formatted for clarity and readability. Late assignments will not be awarded full points. Do not send links to Google Docs.

Grades will generally be posted to Blackboard within a week. If you fail to turn in an assignment, it will show on Blackboard Grade Center — I cannot follow up with you to ask about missing assignments.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

This includes filming or recording of instructor and/or classmates. There will be no filming or recording in class of performances or classwork.

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Use of AI Generators

You may wish to use AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools) in this class. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to provide guidance with these tools during office hours or after class. Keep in mind the following:

- AI tools are permitted to help you brainstorm topics or revise work you have already written.
- If you provide minimum-effort prompts, you will get low-quality results. You will need to refine your prompts to get good outcomes. This will take work.
- AI is a tool, but one that you need to acknowledge using. Please include notes at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining how (and why) you used AI and indicate/specify the prompts you used to obtain the results what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity policies.
- Be thoughtful about when AI is useful. Consider its appropriateness for each assignment or circumstance.

Learning Experience Evaluation

Learning Experience Evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university-wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class. You should expect to receive an email update once the system has launched to provide your feedback on this course. In addition, you are always welcome to connect with me as the instructor to offer any feedback on the course.

Attendance

Being absent, late, or leaving early disturbs the important ensemble nature of this class, and in-class activity points will be deducted. You must be present and ready to work at the start of each class.

However, your health and the health of our community eclipses all. If your health status precludes you from attending class in-person, I may be able to conduct class as hybrid. I will not open the Zoom classroom unless you discuss with me via email before class begins. Travel and other scenarios are not grounds for attending via Zoom. Do not attend class in-person if you have symptoms of a virus. If you are not sure, please wear a mask.

Extracurricular activities do not excuse you from class work. Activities that have been officially sanctioned by the larger university are exempt, with pre-submitted official documentation. See SDA Statement on Productions, ISPs, and Extra-Curricular Commitments below.

Classroom Norms

- Devices — Engagement with cell phones and other electronic devices during class is prohibited. Cell phones should be left on silent in your backpack/bag (not pocket), away from your work in class. This is to encourage your focus, presence, and respect to your peers. Use of cell phones in class will negatively affect your in-class activity points for the day. Consider yourself untethered in this class.
- Attire — Please wear clothing in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing and shoes should not inhibit you in any way. No flip flops or open-toed shoes. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged.
- Eating — Open food and drink is not permitted in any SDA classroom. Absolutely no chewing gum, please dispose of before class.
- Break — We will likely take one break, at around the halfway point of class, depending on the day's flow. Other than that, please be prepared to stay in the room and active as both performer and audience member. In the

event of an emergency for which you must leave the room, observe theatre rules of being discrete and respectful to your fellow comedians (i.e do not enter or leave the room while others are performing).

- Strike — Please restore the classroom to neutral at the end of each class.

"Comedy is here to bring joy to the world, whether you want to hear the curse words or not." —Kenan Thompson

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Please note: due to the fluid and creative nature of this course, weekly structure will change to accommodate the needs of individuals and the ensemble. You are asked to remain flexible, and you will be informed of any changes as much as possible.

Most classes will begin with group work and warm-ups, exploring foundations of presence, physicality, focus, relaxation, concentration, imagination, storytelling, playfulness, and ensemble-building.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
1	Tues Jan 9	Welcome/Introductions. Syllabus and expectations review. Our thoughts on and relationship to Comedy. Begin fearlessness and personal material work.		DUE NEXT WEEK: Bring in an existing piece of comedy that feels personal to you, ignites you in some way and makes you laugh out loud. Read chapter 1 of <i>Ha!</i> , posted on Blackboard.
2	Tues Jan 16	Discussion and exercises on Comedy Theories: (Incongruity, Relief, Superiority, et al). Comedy terms overview. Personal comedy share. Discussion and exercises on Comedy Acting Tools. Begin improv & reaction work.	Read for discussion: Chapter 1 of <i>Ha!</i> & LA Times article. Personal comedy share.	Read two 2023 "On Comedy" articles from <i>New York Times</i> , instructions on Blackboard. Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
3	Tues Jan 23	Improv & reaction work. Basic Rules for the Comic Actor: From body to script. Scriptwork.	Read for discussion: Chapter 3 of <i>The Comic Toolbox</i>	Read chapter 3 of <i>The Comic Toolbox</i> , posted on Blackboard. Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
4	Tues Jan 30	Basic Rules for the Comic Actor: From body to script. Scriptwork.		Read chapters 1-3, <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i> , posted on Blackboard.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
5	Tues Feb 6	Discussion and exercises on Comedic characters. Discussion and exercises on Comedy Premises/Plots. Begin open scene work in pairs.	Read for discussion: Chapters 1-3 of <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i>	Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse/plan comedy open scene.
6	Tues Feb 13	PHYSICAL COMEDY/ CLOWNING with guest professional.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse comedy open scene.
7	Tues Feb 20	Open scene work.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse comedy open scene.
8	Tues Feb 27	Open scene work.		Final Rehearsal comedy open scene.
9	Tues Mar 5	Midterm: present open scenes. Introduction to comedy types and mediums.	MIDTERM: Present open scenes. Written component due before class.	Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
SPRING BREAK!				
10	Tues Mar 19	SKETCH COMEDY.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
11	Tue Mar 26	STAND-UP COMEDY with guest professional.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
12	Tue Apr 2	SITCOMS with guest professional.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
13	Tue Apr 9	Pitch Final Project. Assign collaboration support. Final project discussion/ rehearsal.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
14	Tue Apr 16	Final project draft due/ rehearsal. Notes.	Final project draft due.	Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Compile all Comedy Notebook assignments for submission.
15	Tue Apr 23	Learning Experience Evaluations. Final prep for final project.	Final Notebooks Due! All creative assignments and consumption reflections.	
FINAL	THURSDAY MAY 2 – 2-4pm	Final Presentation of Final Comedy Project (Comedy Fest!)		Happy Summer!

"You start learning (comedy), and it's like playing a piano. You know exactly what keys to stroke, 'cause really, with comedy, you're, like, fiddling with people's souls." – Tiffany Haddish

SDA Statements On...

Productions, ISPs, and Extra-Curricular Commitments

SDA productions, ISPs and extracurricular activities* do not excuse you from any class work. There will be no exceptions made for absences in class, missed or delayed assignments, homework or lack of class participation resulting from your involvement in any of the above. Your grade will reflect your work in this class, independent from work in any other class or activity.

(*Activities that have been officially sanctioned by the larger university are exempt. You must submit official documentation to your professor regarding your participation in an event prior to your absence.)

Student Support & Reporting Form

To facilitate a supportive environment of accountability, SDA has created an internal system of reporting for students to address issues/concerns and to offer feedback or suggestions for improvement. This mechanism provides a pathway for reporting and offering feedback without fear of retaliation or judgment. Any submission filed through this form will be reviewed and processed accordingly through SDA Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. To file a report, please visit: <https://bit.ly/SDAstudentreporting>

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion + Intimacy in Theater Consent Culture

Through our pluralistic approach of diverse pedagogies, methodologies, ideologies, and modalities of artistic expression, we invite (engage) and challenge students to expand their breadth and depth of knowledge, complexity, and range of the human experience. Even though we nurture, guide, and challenge our students to embrace the unknown or unfamiliar and step outside of their comfort zones through storytelling/art, we aim to practice effective strategies and offer tools to students mindful of their physical, psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing. In alignment with professional and industry standards, we will integrate core principles and techniques of Intimacy in Theater and Building Cultures of Affirmative Consent. This will provide agency, offer resources and support to the teachers, students, directors, and staff to establish healthy boundaries of consent when working on material that is physically, intimately, or emotionally charged content in both the classroom and production.

USC Statements On...

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The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see [the student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Students and Disability Accommodations

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213)

740-9355 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for

both calls and text messages - 24/7 on call
The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213)

740-9355(WELL) - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 - 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 - 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu