

THTR 474 Intro to Standup Comedy
Spring 2025—Wednesdays (63173)—2 to 3:50pm
Location: DAB B5 (Stop Gap Theater)
Units: 2

Instructor: Judith Shelton (Jude)

Office: JEF 202 or Virtual: <https://usc.zoom.us/my/judes.office>

Office Hours by appointment: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

Contact Info: You may contact me Mon. – Fri., 9am-5pm

Email preferred – judiths@usc.edu

I return emails Monday – Friday, 9am-5pm

On class days, in an emergency, text 626.390.3678

Course Description

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, and sets while discovering your truth and your voice. Students will practice bringing themselves to the stage with complete abandon and unashamed commitment to their unique sense of humor. We will explore the “rules” that facilitate a healthy standup dynamic and delight in the human connection through comedy. Students will draw on anything and everything to prepare and perform a three-and-a-half-minute-set in front of a live campus audience.

Learning Objectives

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

- Implement the comic’s tools: notebook, mic, stand, “the light,” and recording device
- List the elements of a joke and numerous joke styles
- Execute the stages of standup: write, “get up,” record, evaluate, re-write, get back up
- Identify style, structure, point of view, and persona in the work we admire
- Demonstrate their own point of view and comedy persona (or character)
- Use improvisation, crowd work, and editing as needed
- Differentiate audience feedback (including heckling) using sight and sound
- Demonstrate being an active listener, offering “pitches” and audience feedback
- Participate in constant, constructive evaluation of their own work
- Write and perform a three-and-a-half-minute standup act

Recommended Reading

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

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

The History of Stand-Up by Wayne Federman

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

Daily Rituals: How Artists Work by Mason Currey

It’s Garry Shandling’s Book by Judd Apatow

How to Succeed in Business Without Really Crying by Carol Leifer

Auditing Student Policy

Auditing students attend class strictly as observers and will not participate.

Recommended Preparation

Stay healthy: take care in high-risk situations and wash your hands.

Come to each class on time and be prepared to get on stage.

Come willing to take risks, be honest yet playful, inquisitive, and supportive.

We do not officially take a break during class, but you may use the restroom when necessary.

Course Notes on Attendance

This is a performance class; all “the good stuff” happens in class. Missing class means missing points for the in-class exercises and discussions, impacting your grade. Also, being late or leaving early will cost you a participation point. You may make up 15 points if the need to miss class completely/arrive late/leave early arises. Use those missed classes wisely; a variety of things could come up. I offer fifteen points, so try to stay healthy and be present in class. If you are not in class to perform, you must make up those missed points.

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment:

Grades are not dictated by the success of comedy presentations or the instructor’s subjective opinion of talent, intellect, or sense of humor.

Grades are dictated by:

Points. Each aspect of class has a point value: participation, in-class exercises and assignments, Midterm, Show, and Final. I provide options to make up 15 points total per semester. More details are listed under “Make-Up Options”.

Participation (15% of total grade):

- In-class active 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 the instructor and other students to one’s work
- If a student is late or leaves early, they will lose their participation point for that day

Exercises and Assignments (47% of total grade):

- Due to the live performance aspect of standup comedy, exercises and homework assignments will be presented in class, no video submissions will be accepted at any time
- If you cannot commit to being in this class on time, please wait for another semester
- 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

Midterm (16% of total grade):

- The Midterm presentation is worth 16 points, presented in class w/no paper component
- You may use PowerPoint, but it is not required
- What *is* required is showing a photo during the presentation and submitting a clip
- If you miss the Midterm, you lose 16 points, which will significantly impact your grade
- The policy for tardiness/leaving early (pg. 4) applies to the Midterm as well
- No phones or papers, but you may use PowerPoint or hold 3x5 or 5x7 index cards

Show (15% of total grade):

- You must perform in the Show; it is worth 15 points
- Performers know that making their health a priority is part of the job
- Please use extra caution to keep yourself healthy during show week
- You may choose to do less time, but let’s talk about it before you decide
- If you do not perform in the show, you will lose 15 points

Final (7% of total grade):

- The Final will be submitted electronically via the Brightspace board, TBD.
- The Final is a paper worth 7 points and must be at least 500 words. I will check the count.
- The Final must be posted by the end of the 2-hour Final period, with no emailed papers.
- Tech problems happen during finals week, please submit early. No late papers accepted.
- Not posting a paper on time will result in losing 7 points, impacting your grade.

Make-up options:

- If you miss an in-class exercise or assignment, you may make up 15 points by Friday, May 2nd, at 11:59pm. Brightspace submissions close at 11:59pm.
- You may make up **8 points** by doing a **non-USC** open mic or booked show.
- You may make up **6 points** by doing a **USC** open mic or booked show.
- You must send a clip of your set. (A photo + audio clip will also work)
- You must post the clip AND a paragraph (at least 5 sentences) on the experience to the class and me via a specific board on Brightspace, TBD.
- Technical/posting issues will result in a loss of points, leave time to figure it out.
- You may make up **2 points** by switching to my other section on Fridays, 10-11:50am, DAB B5. Please email ahead of time to be sure there is room for you.
- You may make up **3 points** by watching a live standup show or a streaming comedy special and post a paragraph (at least 7 sentences) to the Brightspace discussion board.
- Make-up points do not count toward the Show or Final. You must do the show.

Exercises and Assignments	Points
Week 1, in-class improvised exercise	1
Week 2, in-class improvised exercise (Pain)	1
Week 3, in-class write/get up exercise (Anger)	3
Week 4, 1 st assignment: Joke Styles	6
Week 5, 2 nd assignment: 10 Jokes	10
Week 6, 3 rd assignment: First Set	4
Week 7, in-class exercise, Crowd Work	3
MIDTERM Presentation: Critical Analysis, Established Comedian	16
Week 9, in-class exercise, Heckling	3
Week 10, NO CLASS-SPRING BREAK	0
Week 11, 5 th assignment: Second Set	5
Week 12, 6 th assignment: Clean Set	7
Week 13, 7 th assignment: Loose jokes, new jokes, tags, and toppers	5
Week 14, 8 th assignment: Final Set-Draft, 1 st Show Rehearsal	7
Week 15, 9 th assignment: Final Set-Polished, 2 nd Show Rehearsal	7
Week 16, SHOW WEEK	15
FINAL: Paper Due: Critical Analysis, Self	7
Total	100

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:

- Students joining the class late must make up all the missed week's points.
- If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a "W," April 11th. I will discuss your work at any time.
- Auditing students attend class strictly as observers and do not participate.

Assignment Submission Policy

This is a live performance class, no video submissions of presentations or exercises are accepted. Visits to my office hours are not a substitute for in-class work.

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.

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university itself, such as suspension or even expulsion.

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.

Sharing of course materials outside of the learning environment

USC policy prohibits sharing of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment. SCampus Section 11.12(B)

Distribution or use of notes or recordings based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study is a violation of the USC Student Conduct Code. This includes, but is not limited to, providing materials for distribution by services publishing class notes. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the Internet or via any other media. (See Section C.1 Class Notes Policy).

Course evaluation

Course 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

Absences:

Developing standup 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: if you miss a class, points awarded that day for performing your standup material in class and being an active, supportive audience member will be lost.** I provide make-up options should you need to miss a class or two. But things happen; save missing class for emergencies.

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 2 to 3:50pm. **If you arrive after 2:05pm you will lose your participation point for the day.**

Students arriving late are put at the end of the lottery and might 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 wish to go, losing all the points for the day. I do, however, try my best to get you all up. I realize things happen, and I will try to make time for you, but this class is full, only 2 hours, and we have a lot to cover. Be mindful of days that have more points, like the 10 Jokes Day and the Midterm. I end class at 3:40pm to give homework.

Everyone who attends class on time and stays the duration will get up. Anyone late/leaving early may or may not get up, depending on time and running order. If you are not in class for the homework, please refer to this syllabus or contact another student. Please do not email me asking what the homework is. It is all here in this syllabus. Choose to be in class on time, stay the whole class, and remain aware of what is required of you.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

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

(This timeline is subject to change in *extreme* cases. Being in class ensures you are aware of any changes.)

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings and Homework	Deliverable/ Due Dates
<i>Week 1</i> Jan. 15	Warm-up, introductions, discussion of syllabus (our contract) Introduction to the tools of our trade A guide to the writing phases: Write, “get up”, record, evaluate, rewrite, get back up In-class improvised exercise and stage time	Re-write your jokes, evaluate, and compile them to build your show set.	Ongoing – you are gathering material every week for the show at the end.
<i>Week 2</i> Jan. 22	Pain in Standup: Comedy as sword, shield, or balm Class conversation and clips In-class improvised exercise and stage time How to write for stand up	<i>Re-write your jokes, evaluate, and compile them to build your show set.</i>	<i>Ongoing – you are gathering material every week for the show.</i>
<i>Week 3</i> Jan. 29	Anger in Standup: Bend it, don’t break it Class conversation and clips In-class writing exercise and stage time	Homework: Research the joke style I assign to you	Due week 4
<i>Week 4</i> Feb. 5	First assignment* - Joke Styles Present assigned joke style given in class 3 minutes, max. I will give specifics in class and on Brightspace	Homework: Deliver 10 original jokes, in any joke style	Due week 5
<i>Week 5</i> Feb. 12	Second assignment* - 10 Jokes Perform 10 original jokes, any style 3 minutes, max. Extra credit points awarded for any extra jokes with their own set up and punch. (Take advantage of this!)	Homework: Work on first set	Due week 6
<i>Week 6</i> Feb. 19	Third assignment* - First Set Bring in 2 minutes max. of best “bits” from weeks 1-5, creating a “set” Clips and discussion on Point of View and Stage Persona; the use of rhythm, timing, wit, physicality, and recurring themes	Homework: Research and watch examples of crowd work	Due Week 7
<i>Week 7</i> Feb. 26	Performance survival skill #1: Crowd Work and Improvising Skill #1 that leads to confidence and flexibility, on stage and in life In-class discussion, exercise, and stage time	No homework! Receive assigned comic in class and prepare for Midterm presentation	MIDTERM week 8

<i>Week 8</i> March 5	MIDTERM* Presentation Critical Analysis of Established Comic No phones or papers allowed “on stage” 3x5 or 5x7 notecards or PowerPoint OK Presentation of assigned comedian, analyzing, and critiquing their material, influences, POV, persona, work habits, career, demons, legacy, etc. I will give specifics in class and on Brightspace	Homework: Research and watch examples of heckling	Due week 9
<i>Week 9</i> March 12	Performance survival skill #2: Heckling and Discernment Skill #2 that leads to confidence and flexibility, on stage and in life In-class discussion, exercise, and stage time	Homework: Prepare 2nd set 2.5-3 minutes max. <i>Please have fun during break, too!</i>	Due week 11
<i>Week 10</i> March 19	No class-Spring break	Homework: Prepare 2nd set 2.5-3 minutes max.	Due week 11
<i>Week 11</i> March 26	Fifth assignment* - Second Set Present second set, 2.5-3 minutes max. May include new material Assessment of each student’s POV/Persona	Homework: Work on 3-minute clean set.	Due week 12
<i>Week 12</i> April 2	Sixth assignment* - CLEAN SET! What is a clean set? It depends on the audience. Ask the booker what they mean when they ask for a clean set. But to be safe, no curse words, no graphic sex or bodily functions. For this class, I want EXTREME clean. 8-80. Would your niece laugh? Would your grandpa laugh? This is a hard class but give it a sincere try, you’ll be surprised! Most TV requires some kind of clean set.	Homework: Bring all those loose jokes, new jokes, tags and toppers! 3 minutes max.	Due week 13
<i>Week 13</i> April 9	Seventh assignment* - Loose jokes, new jokes, tags, and toppers! Last chance to try all those jokes that didn’t make it into class.	Homework: Work on 3.5-minute draft of show set for class run through/first rehearsal Hosts will audition, too!	Due week 14

<i>Week 14</i> April 16	Eighth assignment* - First rehearsal w/ hosts* Perform a 3.5-minute draft of final set Must choose from material presented in classes 1-13 Hosts will audition on this day *Not everyone who wants to host will host	Homework: Bring your polished set for a final class run through/second rehearsal 3.5 minutes max. MEMORIZED!	Due week 15 (Reminder: make-up work due MAY 2 by 11:59 pm, Show day, do it early!)
<i>Week 15</i> April 23	Ninth assignment* - Final rehearsal w/ hosts* Perform a 3.5-minute show set Memorized No new material Some hosts will be called back on this day *Not everyone who wants to host will host	Homework: CRUSH IT AT THE SHOW! Invite all your friends and family!	Due week 16 (Reminder: make-up work due May 2 by 11:59 pm, Show day, do it early!)
<i>Week 16</i> Class April 30 Show May 2	SHOW DAY! I don't usually hold class this week, but I need to get your evaluations. If I get to 80% response rate beforehand, no class. We will check-in beforehand and confirm. *Earlier in the semester you will sign up for 1 of 2 shows via a Google doc Friday, May 2 (time TBD, earlier in the evening) Friday, May 2 (time TBD, later in the evening)	Homework: Write and post Final paper	Due Monday May 7 by 9pm via Brightspace, no late or emailed papers accepted
<i>FINAL</i> May 7 Due by 9pm	Final* Critical Analysis, Self – Paper only, no class Written paper due, self-assessing your overall progress through the class; including personal challenges, strengths, weaknesses, victories, and how you will use these standup skills going forward. Submitted via Brightspace discussion board, only. 500 words minimum. No class meeting.		Hooray, you did it! Thank you for doing your best! Have a lovely summer!

Class Show Dates

Standup Shows are on campus. You will perform in one show only. Choose from either:

Fri. May 2nd (Time TBD, earlier in the evening)

Fri. May 2nd (Time TBD, later in the evening)

*Call time is 30 minutes before the show and is MANDATORY

You must be at one of the two rehearsals (class 14 and 15) to **participate** in the show*

Hosts, you must be at both rehearsals (class 14 and 15) to **host** the show

*Missing either class rehearsal will result in lost points

KEY DATES <https://classes.usc.edu/term-20251/registration-calendar/> (up-to-date info.)

Jan 13: Spring semester classes begin

Jan. 20: Martin Luther King Day, university holiday

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

Feb. 17: Presidents’ Day, university holiday

Feb. 28: Last day to drop without a mark of “W” on official transcript only

Feb. 28: Last day to change P/NP to a letter grade

March 16-23: Spring recess

April 11: Last day to drop this class with a mark of “W”

May 2: Spring semester classes end

May 3-6: Study days

May 7-14: Final examinations

May 14: Spring semester ends

May 14-17: Commencement Week

Additional Notes

- ***No eating is allowed during class at any time, per USC SDA guidelines.***
- ***You may drink water when you need to.***
- ***No social media, texting, computer work. Phones are for sets and recording only.***
- ***We do not take a break, but you may use the restroom as needed.***

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, especially your jokes. Do good work, know yourselves better, risk a little, support each other, and laugh every Wednesday with me!

Judith Shelton (Jude)

SDA PRODUCTIONS, ISPS, AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

SDA productions, ISPs and Extracurricular Activities* will 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 (such as marching band, song girls, or varsity sports) are exempt. You must submit official documentation to your professor regarding your participation in an event prior to your absence.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion + Intimacy in Theatre Consent Culture Statement

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.

SDA 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>

Statement on University Academic and Support Systems

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.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office webpage](#) for undergraduate- and graduate-level SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

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 consists 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).

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) 740-2500
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
Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.