



What Stories Can Learn from Jokes

The next time somebody says, "Three guys go into a bar," pay attention. There's a lesson in storytelling behind the laugh.

Barnet Kellman is an Emmy Award winning director best known for helming over 70 episodes of the hit series "Murphy Brown." He currently teaches a course entitled "Foundations of Comedy" at USC's School of Cinematic Arts, but it was back in 2008, when he was teaching a class on directing that he hit upon an offbeat way to teach his students the fundamentals of storytelling. He made them tell jokes.

"I gave them an assignment before the first class," Kellman told me when we spoke by phone last week. "They had to bring a joke and be prepared to tell it." There was one condition: it couldn't be a knock-knock joke or a riddle. The students did their homework, the jokes told in class ran the gamut from hilarious to weird to just plain dumb, and by the end of the exercise, Kellman had made his point.

"Making them tell jokes gave them an obligation," Kellman said, putting extra emphasis on the last word. "They had to keep people's interest and get a laugh at the end." In fact, Kellman asserts that joke-tellers have no fewer than five obligations to their audience if they are going to earn a good laugh. As Kellman outlined these obligations, I could easily see the parallels to telling a good story:



Barnet Kellman

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There's a lesson behind the laugh.

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1. Quickly grab attention.

Jokes, stories, newscasts, commercials - all forms of communication have this initial obligation because we live in an age of ADD. Kellman said that good joke-tellers instinctively start with the same word - "So..." - because it's the fastest way to meet this first obligation. "Anything else is warming yourself up and wasting time," he added. "You can't wander. You'll lose your audience."

2. Create interest through incident and/or identification with character.

A joke, like a story, is an invitation to temporarily leave the real world behind and teleport instantly to another time and place. Most people are happy to take this leap, but they need a little help first. They need characters with whom they can identify or a familiar scene they can enter. When a joke-teller says, "Three guys go into a bar..." he's meeting this second obligation with just six words. As an illustration for his directing class, Kellman used a joke that begins with precisely this set-up. Before you go any further, go to this [jokes page](#) and scroll about two-thirds down the page to read the full text.

3. Build tension through complication, elaboration and misdirection.

Laughter is literally the body's way of releasing tension, so it stands to reason that the more tension a joke-teller can build up, the bigger the laugh. Note how the joke about the three men in a bar presents a pattern of behavior (i.e., tossing bottles in the air and shooting them) that builds into a bizarre battle of one-upmanship. Stories build tension in similar ways, giving the audience just enough information so they understand what's happening but are curious to see what happens next.

4. Make "the turn" (i.e., a sudden change in attention or subject).

"A joke is really *two* stories," said Kellman in explaining the fourth obligation. "The set-up gets us following one story, but we ultimately end up in another." The bottle-shooting contest seems to be a story about a macho display of hometown pride until the third man (from Boulder) shoots the other two. The stories you tell may never feature such a dramatic turn of events, but they do require some element of surprise. "You keep people interested by *not* letting them know exactly where you're going," said Kellman.

5. Deliver the punchline.

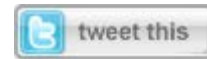
Like stories, jokes are intended to convey meaning, and that's what the punchline is all about. After all the elaboration, complication and misdirection, the punchline reveals the true meaning of the story: the Boulderite in the bar isn't a cold-blooded murderer. He's just an ardent believer in recycling! "The laugh at the end proves you've successfully conveyed your meaning," said Kellman. "It's a verdict you can't hide from." Storytellers don't have to deliver punchlines, but their tales must convey meaning - the final, and perhaps most important obligation of all.

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The Perfect Gift for Storytellers

"Stories Worth Telling," a brand new guide for nonprofit communicators, is an excellent resource - and best of all, it's free.



Capacity Waterloo Region (CWR) is an organization in Alberta, Canada that helps nonprofits work more effectively. There's a serious commitment to storytelling in the Kitchener-Waterloo region, and CWR has brought me in - along with other communications experts - to conduct workshops for the good causes it serves.

Now the organization has assembled our best advice in "Stories Worth Telling," a comprehensive guide expressly designed for nonprofits. This free booklet can help you find more good stories, interview people more effectively, write stories with the structure and qualities that make them memorable and compelling, and build a storytelling culture within your organization.

The PDF is available for download on the [CWR site](#), and contains links to other articles about storytelling, examples of outstanding video storytelling, websites, newsletters, and other rich resources. If you have found *free-range thinking* to be helpful, I know you'll find this guide to be a worthy addition to your library.

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