MAKE THEM LAUGH WITHOUT BREAKING THE STORY

Writing humour through character, detail and the useful business of restraint

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"We need to discuss the goat," said the chairman.

Nobody looked at the goat. This had been the committee's policy for nearly twenty minutes.

The exchange is an invitation, not a guarantee. Some readers will be amused; others will reasonably want to know why a committee has a goat in the first place. That second question is useful. Humour in fiction works best when it belongs to a situation readers can enter, rather

than arriving as a joke the story has been asked to accommodate.

You do not have to become a stand-up comedian to write a funny novel, or turn a serious novel into a comedy to give it moments of lightness. Start with people trying to do things, notice where their intentions meet reality and choose language that lets readers enjoy the collision.

FIND THE EXPECTATION BEFORE YOU TURN IT

One useful source of humour is a mismatch between what seems likely and what actually happens. The mismatch needs enough preparation to be understood.

A committee discussing an unexpected goat may be mildly absurd. A committee attempting to conduct the meeting as though the goat is an ordinary administrative inconvenience offers a more particular comic situation.

The people want order. The circumstances do not cooperate. Their insistence on behaving correctly becomes part of the trouble.

Establish the expectation clearly. If readers do not understand what the character intends, they may not recognize the departure from it. If the outcome is entirely random, surprise may replace amusement without adding anything to the story.

Try writing the straightforward version first. What would a sensible person expect to happen? Then look for a believable complication that exposes a character's habits, priorities or mistaken assumption.

The best alternative is not always the strangest. It is often the one that makes this person's particular difficulty visible.

GIVE THE CHARACTER A SERIOUS INTENTION

Characters do not have to know they are funny. A person attempting something sincerely can create more convincing humour than someone performing for an invisible audience.

The chairman wants the meeting to finish before the caretaker locks the hall. He has prepared an agenda, printed copies and promised himself he will not be drawn into another argument about refreshments.

The goat threatens all three ambitions. He responds by asking whether it was invited under item four.

His seriousness gives the absurdity resistance. If everyone immediately behaves as though the scene is a sketch, the situation may lose the human purpose that makes it engaging.

This is especially useful in a story with an emotionally serious centre. A character may be embarrassed, determined or anxious while the reader finds their methods amusing. Let the feeling remain real.

You can enjoy a character's predicament without declaring that their desire is foolish or that their difficulties do not matter.

USE SPECIFICITY TO FIND THE FUNNIER CHOICE

"He brought too much equipment" is a general observation. "He brought a folding lectern to a conversation in the car park" gives readers an image and a judgement about the person involved.

Specific objects can reveal comic disproportion. A carefully laminated sign for an occasion nobody else considers official tells us more than the word "fussy."

Choose details that fit the character's thinking. Someone who dislikes uncertainty might label the biscuit tins. Someone who wants to appear relaxed might buy a book about spontaneous conversation and make notes in it.

Avoid assuming that adding a peculiar noun makes a sentence funny. The detail needs a relationship with the situation. A pineapple can be perfectly ordinary in a kitchen and strangely revealing in a briefcase prepared for a disciplinary hearing.

When a line feels vague, ask what the person would actually bring, say, count or protect. The concrete answer may contain the humour you were trying to announce.

LET VOICE DELIVER THE OBSERVATION

A narrator's attitude can make an ordinary event amusing. Understatement, dry precision, exuberance or solemn attention to a minor problem can all contribute.

"The discussion became heated" reports an outcome. "By the time they reached the minutes of the previous meeting, two people had resigned from the refreshments rota" selects an effect with comic scale.

The voice does not have to point out that the effect is funny. Readers can make the connection.

Keep the approach consistent with the narrator and viewpoint. A comparison that belongs naturally to one person's interests may sound imported into another's thoughts.

If a viewpoint character loves gardening, they may interpret an argument through plants, seasons or stubborn roots. Do not force every sentence into that pattern. A distinctive habit becomes tiring when it appears to have a contractual minimum.

Read several pages together. The question is whether the humour creates a recognizable voice or whether every observation competes to become the cleverest sentence in the room.

UNDERSTATEMENT NEEDS SOMETHING TO UNDERSTATE

A restrained response can be funny when readers understand the scale of the situation.

After a shelf collapses and buries the committee's trophies, the chairman might say, "We may need to reconsider the display arrangements."

The line works through the gap between event and response. Without a clear sense of what happened, it is merely a comment about furniture.

Understatement can reveal someone trying to maintain dignity, avoid panic or refuse emotional disclosure. It can also become a way of showing affection: a character describes a generous act as "not entirely unhelpful" because direct praise makes them uncomfortable.

Vary it with direct language. If every significant event is described as a modest inconvenience, readers may lose the distinction between a funny mishap and a moment whose seriousness needs room.

Ask what the restrained wording reveals about the person using it. That gives the line a purpose beyond producing a small smile.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE ORDER OF INFORMATION

Comic effect can depend on when readers receive a detail. A sentence may establish an ordinary action, then reveal the element that changes its meaning.

"He apologized to everyone in the room, including the portrait" lets the last phrase adjust the picture. If you explain the portrait first and repeat the oddity afterwards, the effect may weaken.

This is not a rule that every funny word must appear last. Rhythm, voice and context matter. The useful exercise is to try more than one order and listen to how the meaning arrives.

Avoid adding a second explanation after readers have understood the turn. "Including the portrait, which of course could not hear him" may tell us what the image has already supplied.

Paragraph breaks can create a pause or reveal, but use them with restraint. If every joke receives its own dramatic platform, the page can begin to look like a series of announcements awaiting applause.

REPEAT WITH DEVELOPMENT

A repeated detail can become a comic pattern when its meaning or consequences change.

At first, the chairman insists the goat is not on the agenda. Later, he appoints someone to keep it away from the flowers. Finally, the animal's presence is recorded in the minutes as an observer.

The returns develop the committee's attempt to absorb the problem into its procedures. Simply repeating "There was a goat" may not achieve the same effect.

You can use two appearances, three or more. There is no compulsory count. Stop when the pattern has done its work rather than repeating it because an earlier version received a laugh.

A callback can also create warmth by returning to a shared detail after readers have spent time with the characters. Keep it understandable at the distance you use it, and consider whether the later context changes its emotional meaning.

A joke can grow into a relationship detail instead of remaining a detachable ornament.

LET DIALOGUE EXPOSE DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

People can be funny together because they are having slightly different conversations.

"Who brought it?" asked the caretaker.

"That is not the immediate question," said the chairman.

"It is eating the immediate curtains."

One person wants to establish procedure; the other wants to protect the room. Their priorities shape the exchange.

Give each speaker a reason to say the line. If everyone abandons their own concern to supply a convenient punchline, their voices may blend into the author's.

Status can matter too. A person trying to retain authority may become increasingly formal as events escape control. Someone with less official power may be the only person prepared to name the obvious problem.

Let speech sound selected rather than mechanically realistic. You can omit greetings, repeated setup and explanations that delay the useful collision. Keep the interruptions, pauses or evasions that reveal how the participants are managing each other.

KEEP CONSEQUENCES IN THE STORY

Humour does not exempt an event from having effects. If the goat destroys the caretaker's work, the caretaker may be upset even when readers find the meeting amusing.

Acknowledging that response can deepen the scene. Someone may stop arguing and help clear the damage. Someone else may reveal a less attractive side by treating the inconvenience as entirely another person's problem.

This keeps characters from becoming disposable equipment for jokes. It also gives the comic event a place in the larger narrative.

In a light comedy, consequences may remain gentle. In a darker story, they may be serious. Choose deliberately and follow the tone you have established.

Be cautious when a joke appears to erase a feeling the story has asked readers to care about. A character can use humour to cope with fear or grief, but the narration need not pretend the underlying experience has vanished because someone found an amusing comparison.

KNOW WHAT THE JOKE ASKS READERS TO ENJOY

Ask where the amusement is directed. Are readers enjoying vanity, disproportion, a surprising observation, an institutional habit or a person struggling with a difficult situation?

The answer affects the tone. A joke about a powerful person's obsession with appearances differs from one that treats another person's vulnerability as inherently ridiculous.

Context matters. Affectionate teasing between established friends can read differently from the same words spoken by someone with power over the listener. Show enough of the relationship for readers to understand the intention and effect.

You do not need to remove all discomfort or write characters who always behave well. You do need to decide whether the story recognizes what their humour does.

When feedback indicates that a line feels unexpectedly cruel, investigate the effect before defending the intention. Perhaps a missing response or a change of viewpoint would clarify the scene. Perhaps the line belongs to a different book than the one you are writing.

LEAVE SPACE AROUND THE HUMOUR

A funny sentence can lose force when five more are trying to overtake it. Quietly functional prose gives observations room to arrive.

Try removing some secondary jokes from a passage. Does the scene become clearer, and do the strongest moments stand out more? Save the alternatives if you are reluctant to lose them. A cut line has not ceased to exist simply because it is no longer standing in the doorway.

Also allow emotional moments to complete their movement. Sometimes a joke is precisely how a character avoids saying what matters. Sometimes it prevents the scene from giving readers a necessary feeling.

Distinguish those uses. If avoidance is the point, let its cost or meaning become visible. If the moment needs sincerity, do not assume a joke must rescue it from being sincere.

Restraint is a craft choice. It can make the humour more welcome because readers are not required to keep laughing on command.

TRY A COMIC LOGIC EXERCISE

Choose a character with a serious, modest goal: make an orderly announcement, impress a visitor or leave a gathering without causing offence.

Give them a method that reflects a particular habit. The organizer prepares too thoroughly. The host refuses to admit anything has gone wrong. The departing guest believes every farewell requires a complete explanation.

Introduce a complication that makes the method less effective. Then let the character respond using the same underlying logic in a slightly altered way.

Write the scene without instructing the reader that it is hilarious, absurd or ridiculous. Use action, dialogue and selected description. Afterwards, remove any line that explains an effect the scene already makes clear.

Try one version with a close, sympathetic viewpoint and another with a more detached narrator. Notice how the distance changes what readers are invited to enjoy.

The exercise is about a pattern of behaviour under pressure. The complication can be tiny. You may not need a goat at all, which will simplify the venue arrangements considerably.

LISTEN TO THE SCENE, THEN LISTEN TO READERS

Read the passage aloud if that suits you. Notice cumbersome setup, repeated explanations and places where the rhythm delays the intended turn.

A trusted reader can tell you where they smiled, where a comparison distracted them and where the humour altered their feeling about a character. Do not demand that they find a line funny because you worked especially hard on it.

Responses differ. Look for useful patterns while keeping the book's intended audience and tone in mind. A quiet comic novel does not need to produce a laugh at fixed intervals.

Return to the scene's main purpose. Has the humour helped reveal people, develop a situation or make the reading experience more alive? If so, it is doing useful work.

The chairman can keep his agenda. Let him care about it, give reality a slightly different plan and trust readers to notice what happens between them.

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