

DON RICHARDSON'S LIST OF BASIC JOKES

Don Richardson directed hundreds of television comedies, had strong opinions about directing and acting for comedy, and one of his first claims was that individual jokes are not as important as the basic joke: the character or character relationships or situations that strike us funny. I watched him stage and re-stage countless comedic scenes, and he always found what was funny and sharpened it for a laugh. Here is my attempt over thirty years to compile a list of every "basic joke" I heard him identify, and a few that my students and I have added since. If you re-post them, please credit the man who taught this so well: Don Richardson, Golden Age Television Director.
– Marshall Vandruft

TYPES (can apply to individual personalities or groups)

The idiot in charge
Bumbling expert
Ineffectual intellectual
Insane psychiatrist
Sinful reformer
Crooked judge
Underwhelming Kingpin
Cowardly hero/warrior/explorer
Frightened cop
Reluctant lovers
Jinxed idealist
Childish adult
Educated dope
Amateur auditioner
Villain ingratiates himself
Merry widow
Jolly undertaker
Eager old maid
Ancient Romeo
Over-aged sex queen
Professional virgin
Hot-pants has no conscience
Gender Surprise
Prude
Sex starved prude
Cuckold
Happy Harvey
Miss Sunshine
Mother-in-law
Jekyll & Hyde
Turnaround
Innocent villain
Social climber
Innocence abroad
Quirky guest
Frantic new father
Inconsolable woman
Compulsive gambler
Born loser (Nature's punching bag, "Why me?")
Born winner (Have cake and eat it too)
Know-it-all
Calamity Jane
Wrong way driver
Liar
Blabbermouth
Hypochondriac
Innocent bystander
Protests too much
Profound thinker
Polonius
Little guys acting like big guys
Eternal Optimist (however bad, sees advantage)
Eternal Pessimist (however good, sees drawback)
Looking the gift horse in the mouth
All things black or white
All things grey

RELATIONSHIPS (connections between types)

The blind leading the blind
Kid is smarter than the grown-ups
Kid lays down law for parents
Child more dissolute than the adult
Servant bossing the master
Little guy bossing the big guy
Little guy beating up the big guy
Mouse teasing the lion
Mouse that roared
Maid is in charge
Doctor sicker than the patient
Competitive incompetence
Competing sufferers
Master outdone by apprentice
Both afraid of each other
Both trying to get along
Not what I did in my day
War between men and women, who's superior
Marriage joke (each faulting the other)
Henpecked husband
Two people in love who don't know it
Reversal of the sexes
Husband who can't bed his wife
Boy trying to make reluctant girl
Catfight (2 women fighting over one lover)
Each suspects the other of being gay
Betrayal by kin
Opposite worlds
Prude & Playboy
Square & Bohemian
Big woman & small lover
Masoquist & Sadist
Strange bedfellows
Spoiled brat & peasant
Sane man surrounded by idiots
Each thinks the other is an idiot
David & Goliath
Practical joke
Practical joke reversed
Con man and sucker
Con men outconning each other
Conman conning conman who thinks he's winning
Conman who is no good at it

SITUATIONS

Mistaken identity
Wrong assumption

Wrong guy getting the medals
Unwelcomed houseguest
Inappropriate emotions
Drama/normalcy
Fish out of water
Square peg in a round hole
Skirting the issue
Trivial made monumental
Premise taken to extreme
Tempest in a teacup (much ado about nothing)
Preparing for battle when there is no war
Man chases woman until she catches him
Man doesn't understand woman
Couch romancing
Lover under the bed
Lover who can't make out
She needs a roll in the hay
Talking sex instead of doing it
Sex on demand
Ways of getting it up
When the penis rises, the brains fly away
Shot gun wedding
Answer in front of your face
Look for praise, get egg on face
Trying to get sanity out of a moron
Enough is enough
Trying to be in charge
They are all nuts but the Englishman
Kissing up to the bully
Last one to know
Like gorillas, everything but fight
They never want the truth when they ask
Celebration at funeral
Wrong person asking forgiveness
Wrong person injured/insulted/upset/suffering
Worm turns

THEMATIC
Goodness punished
Badness rewarded
Goodness rewarded with burden
Badness punished instantly
The curse bounces back
Easy outsmarts uptight
Easy pays the price
They are all failures
Tragic enough to be funny