

Laugh Tracks

Crafting Killer Comedy Songs

Brent Black

What is a comedy song?

(in a musical)

“A song that was written *with the intention of being funny* that gets more laughs than the average number of laughs in its own particular score”.

ANY TYPE OF SONG MOMENT CAN BE A COMEDY SONG!

- Opening Number – “Dream A Little Harder” (Twisted)
- I Want Song – “Great Big Stuff” (Dirty Rotten Scoundrels)
- I Will song – “You and Me But Mostly Me” (The Book of Mormon)
- I Am Song – “Shy” (Once Upon a Mattress)
- Villain song – “Dentist!” (Little Shop of Horrors)
- Cheer Up Song – “Come out of the Dumpster” (The Wedding Singer)
- Romantic solo – “Mr. Snow” (Carousel)
- Romantic duet – “Tennis Song” (City of Angels)

ANY TYPE OF SONG MOMENT CAN BE A COMEDY SONG!

- Lament – “Agony” (Into the Woods)
- Charm Song – “My New Philosophy” (You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown)
- Advice Song – “Turn it Off” (The Book of Mormon)
- Act 1 Closer – Man Up (The Book of Mormon)
- 11 o’ clock Number – “Betrayed” (The Producers)
- Finale – “For Now” (Avenue Q)

Purpose and Utility of Comedy Songs (in musical theatre)

- Comic relief**
- Talking about something heavy in a way that's not too heavy**
- Maintaining the laughs-per-minute in a musical comedy**

INGREDIENTS OF COMEDY

The background of the slide features a series of overlapping, wavy, mountain-like shapes in various shades of purple and blue. The colors transition from a lighter lavender at the top to a deeper, darker blue at the bottom, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

INGREDIENTS OF COMEDY

THE THREE S's:

SETUP
SUBVERT
SURPRISE

1) SETUP:

Create expectations by telling the audience what they need to know in order to get the joke.

Typically, you want to only include information that will lead directly to the joke (information that doesn't contribute to the joke will feel like a loose end)

Make an implied promise about what's about to happen

2) SUBVERT & 3) SURPRISE

*“IF THERE’S NO SURPRISE AT ALL, THERE’S
OFTEN NO LAUGH.”*

HOW TO **SURPRISE**? OFTEN, YOU HAVE TO
SUBVERT THE EXPECTATIONS YOU HAVE SET
UP OR SUBVERT WHAT YOUR AUDIENCE MIGHT
NATURALLY ASSUME ABOUT THE SITUATION

A man with dark hair, wearing a dark shirt, is speaking into a black microphone. He is looking slightly to his left. The background is a blurred night scene with some lights. The entire image is framed by a blue background with white wavy lines on the left and right sides.

God my girlfriend's
so sensitive.

MORE INGREDIENTS OF COMEDY

RULE OF 3, PART 1:

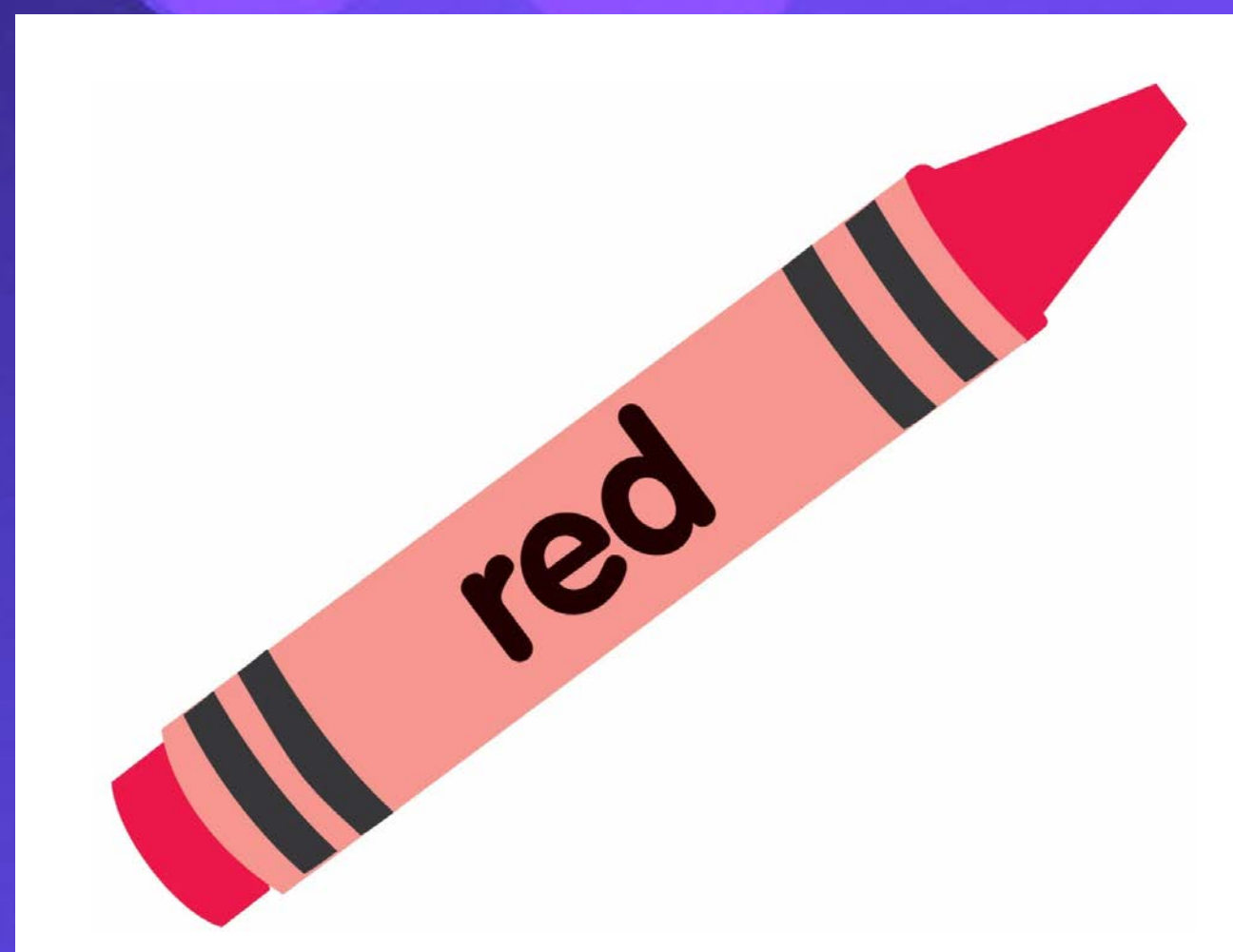
In most cases, only 3 variations of a joke are likely to be funny before it gets old. This is especially true in songwriting if your song is centered around a funny hook or chorus.

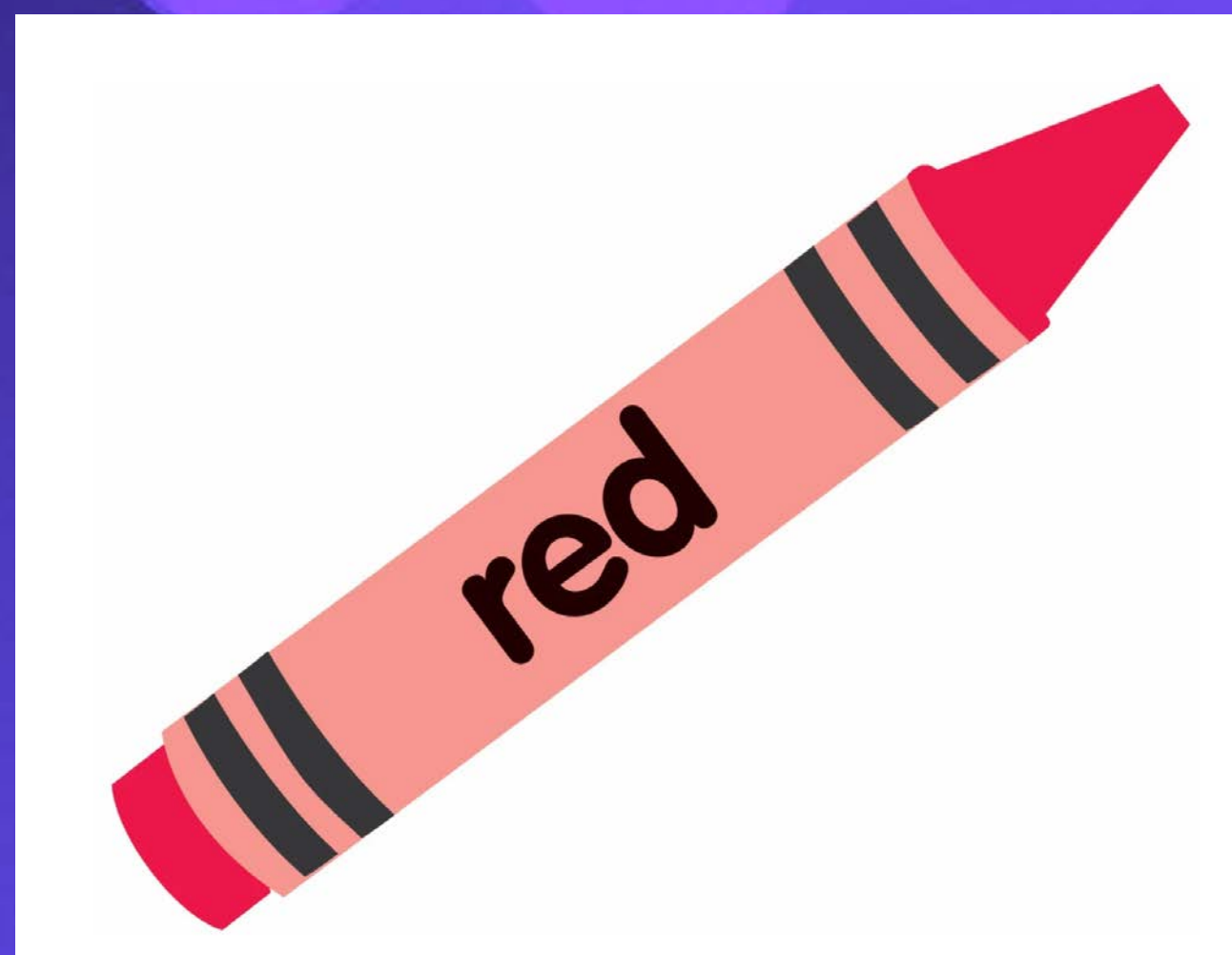
Related: Only 2 callbacks to earlier jokes are likely to remain funny.

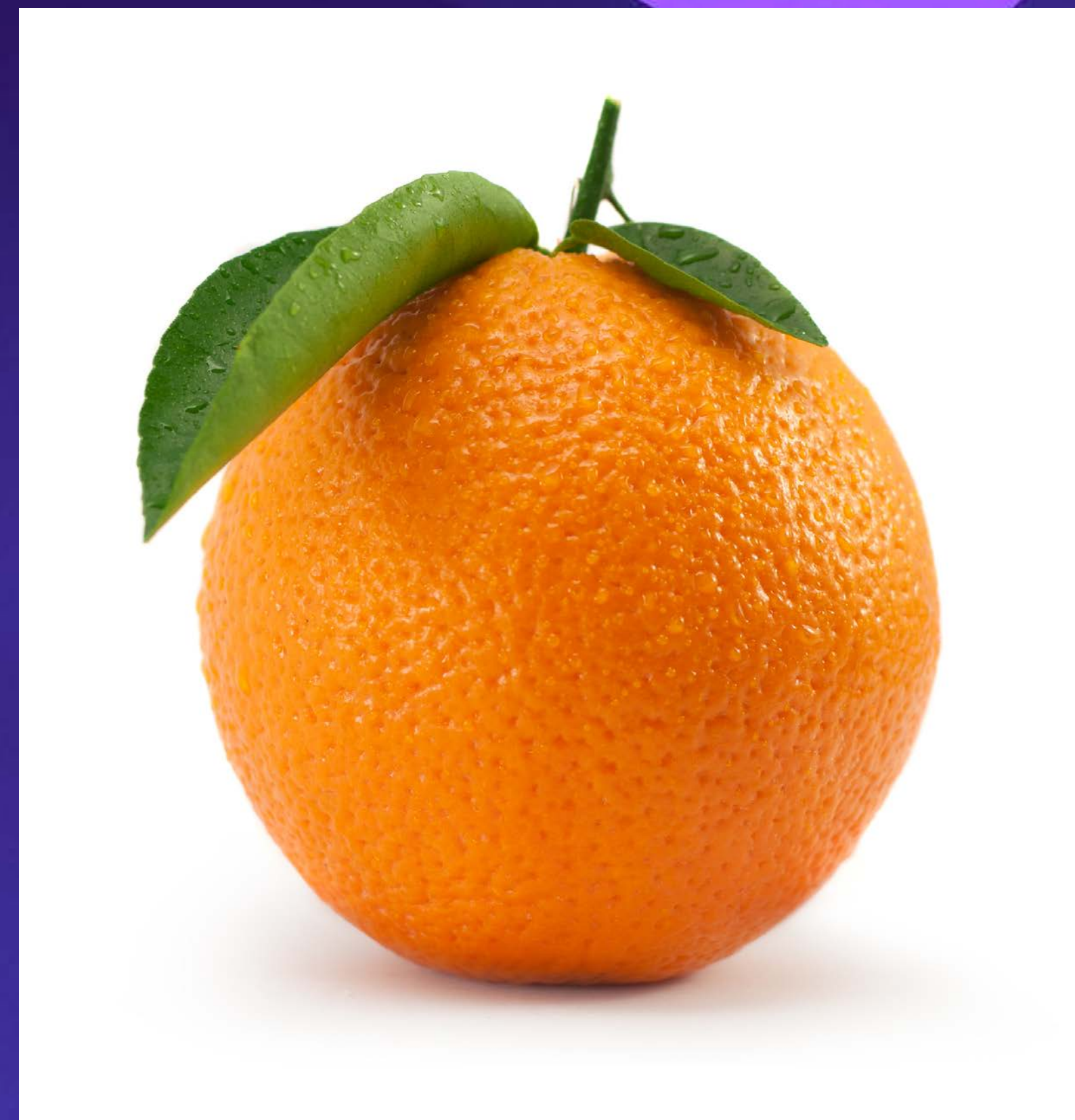
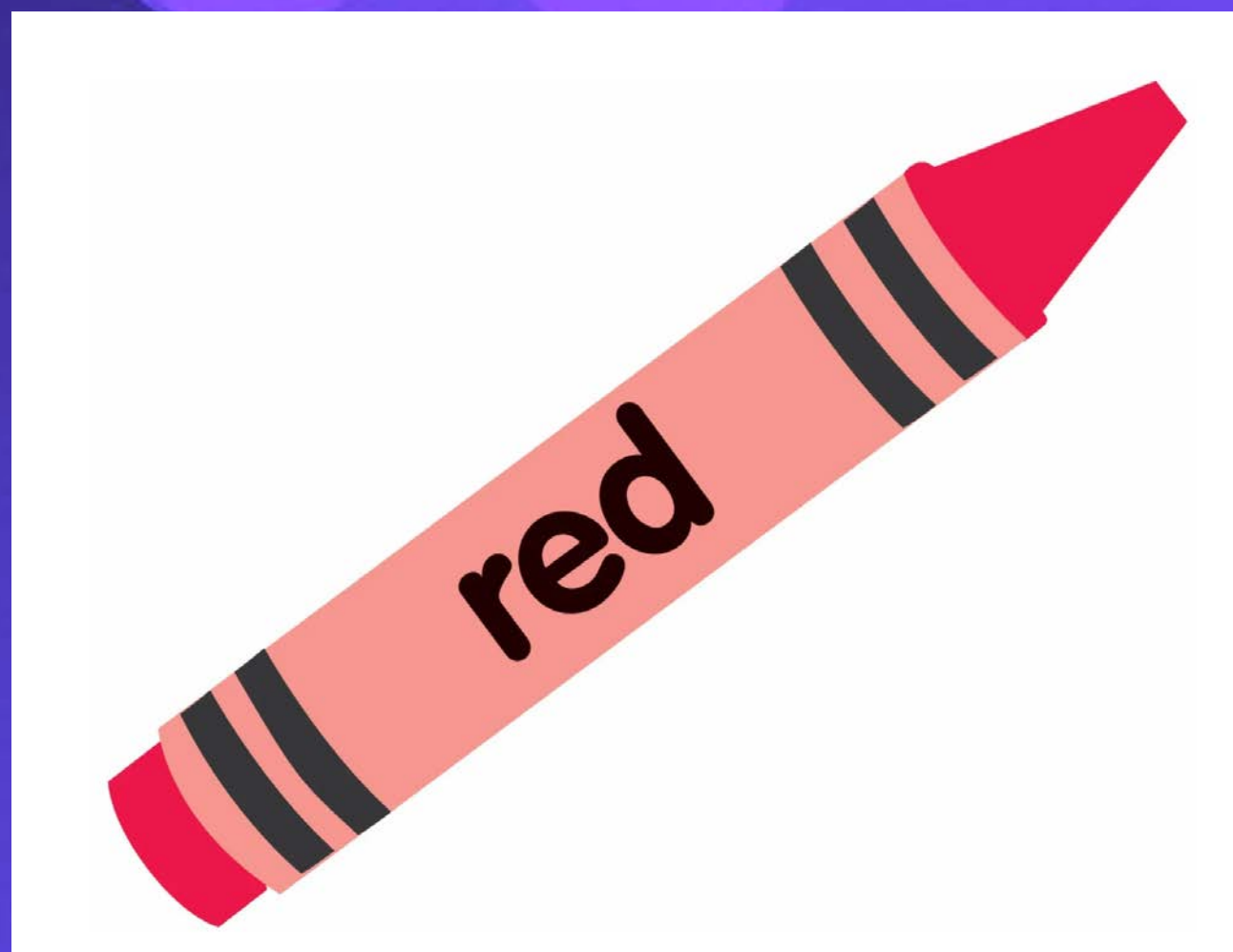
INGREDIENTS OF COMEDY

RULE OF 3, PART 2: THE FORMULA

1. Present something.
2. Present a similar but slightly different thing. (setting up a pattern)
3. Surprise, **TOTALLY DIFFERENT** thing!







INGREDIENTS OF COMEDY

EXAGGERATION





INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

What's on your spice rack?

INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

A FUNNY SITUATION

Hard to teach, but you know it when you see it!

INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

A FUNNY SITUATION OFTEN INCLUDES:

- Discomfort
- Embarrassment
- Schadenfreude
- The Opposite of What You'd Normally Expect

“THREE AMIGOS”

(THE SETUP)





“THREE AMIGOS”

(THE PAYOFF)



INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

A FUNNY JUXTAPOSITION

Two things you either don't expect to see together
or which contrast even in an ironic way when you
see them together

JUXTAPOSITION:

“Shy”



JUXTAPOSITION:

“Not Getting Married”



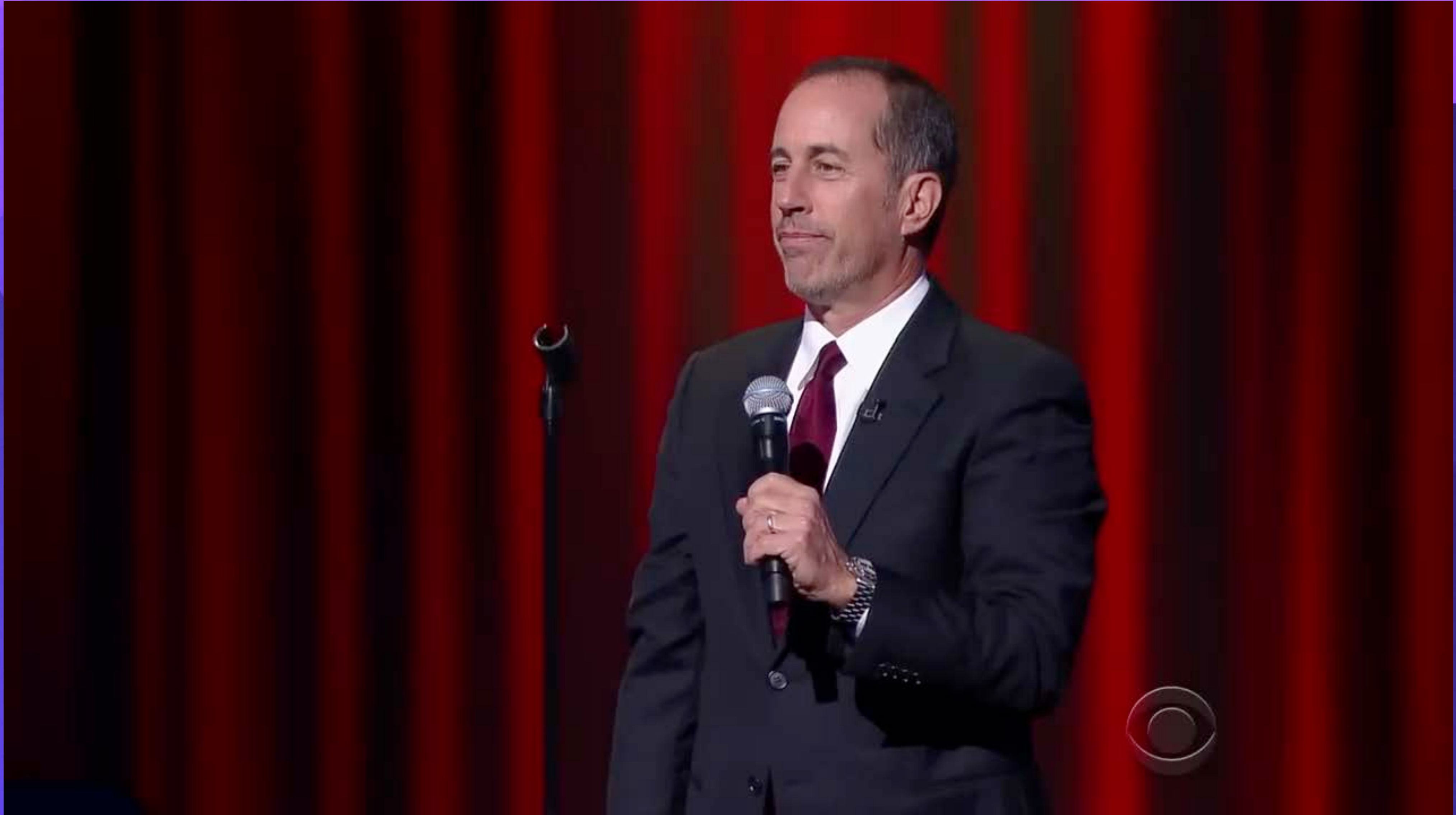
INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

A FUNNY OBSERVATION

“Did you ever notice...”

“What’s the deal with...”





INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

FUNNY OBSERVATION, TYPE 1:

“Tell” the observation

THE “TELL” TYPE OF OBSERVATION SONG: “The Song That Goes Like This”

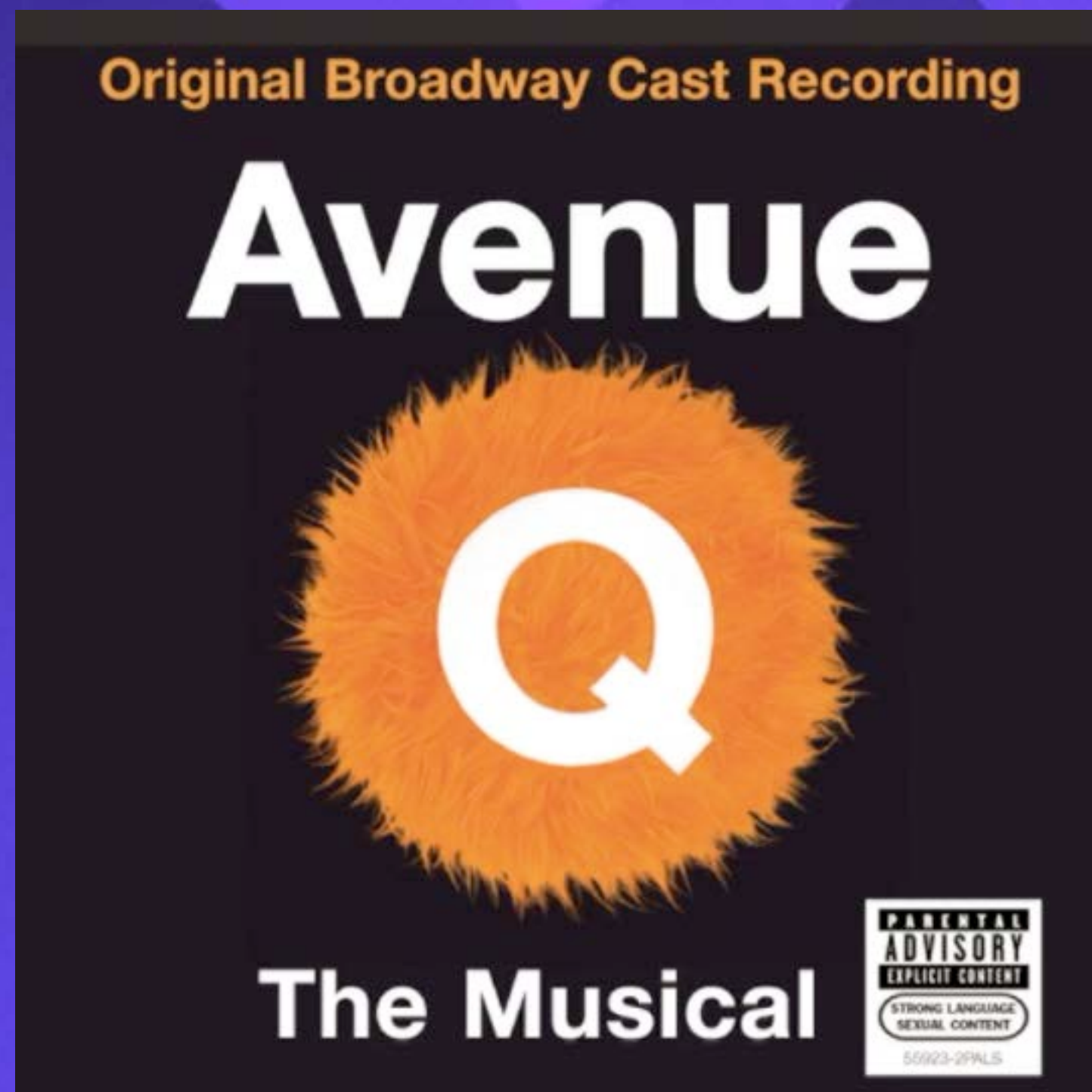


INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

FUNNY OBSERVATION, TYPE 2:

“Show” the observation

THE “SHOW” TYPE OF OBSERVATION SONG: “My Girlfriend (Who Lives in Canada)”



INGREDIENTS OF A COMEDY SONG

HOMAGE

- Exaggeration
- Poking fun
- Creating an analogy











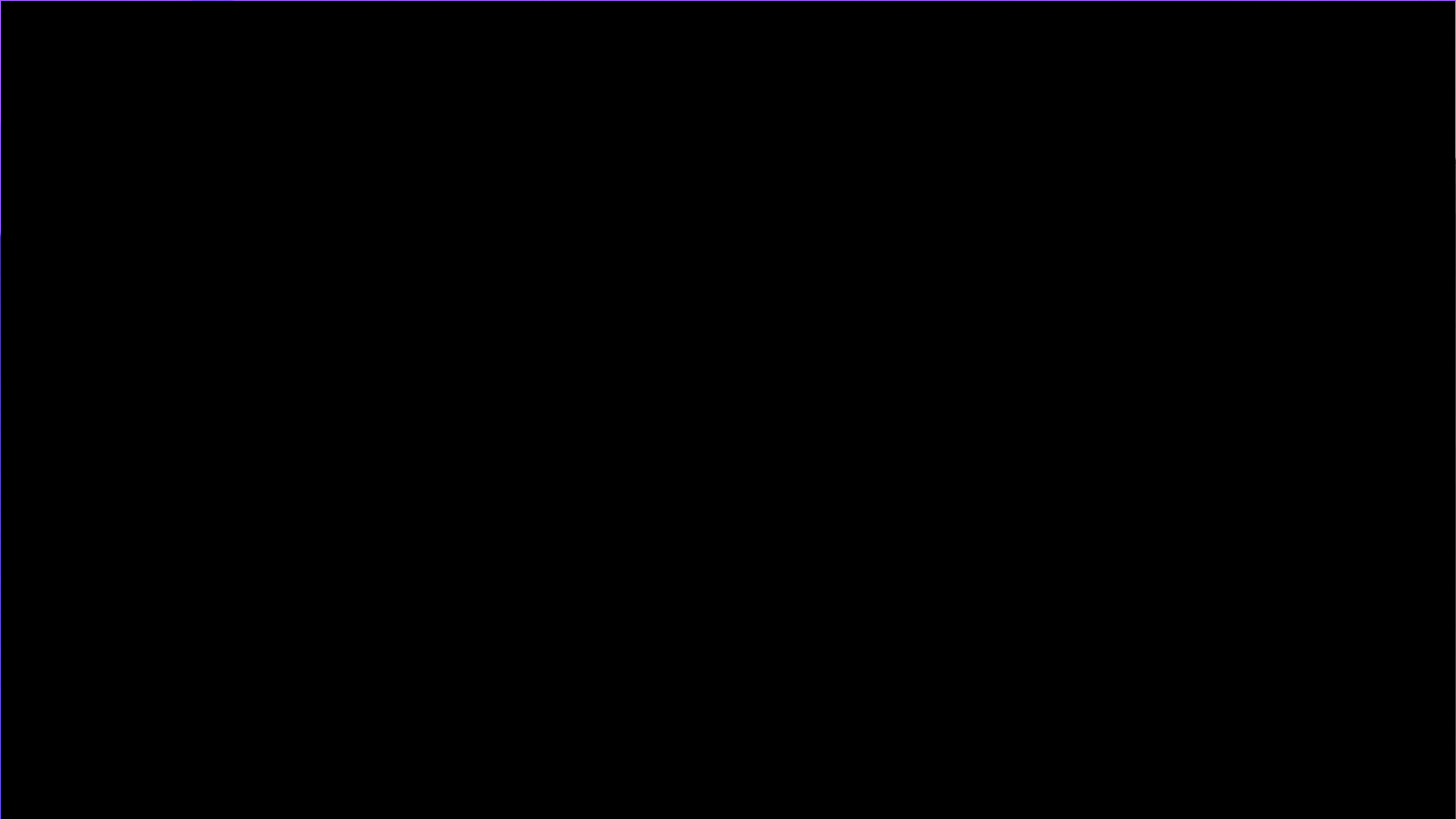












PARODY

- MAKES FUN OF or COMMENTS ON source material

SATIRE/SOCIAL COMMENTARY

- Usually a sub-type of “funny observation” song

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

For writing a “COMEDY SONG”, or for just making any
song in your show funnier!

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

Good Scansion/Prosody

(Are the words coming out the way your character would speak them?)

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

Make the Form Match the Function!

SONG STRUCTURE SHOULD MATCH YOUR INTENTION

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

SHORT IS BETTER THAN TOO LONG!

(YES, YOU READ THAT RIGHT)

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

THE “HOOK FLIP”

Once you establish your hook, you can flip it around in some way.

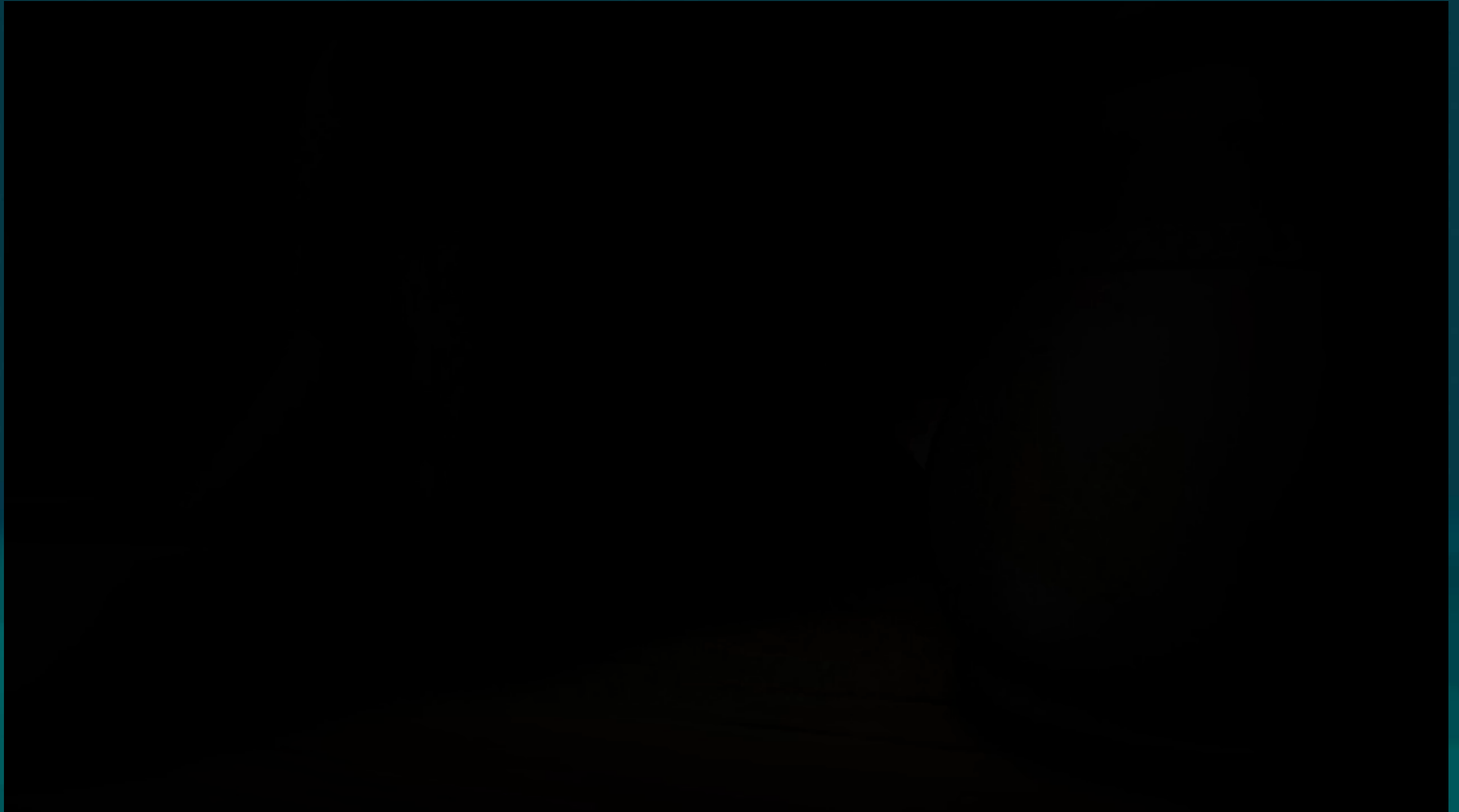
RECHARGE your final hook or chorus by changing the meaning or the context slightly

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

“HIGH STAKES, LOW STAKES”

Make a high stakes moment funny by involving a person whose stakes are low.

“Les Poissons” from *The Little Mermaid*



TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

RHYMING

- * Rhyme makes punchlines funnier
- * When possible, try to use perfect rhymes
- * When possible, use the most operative word or phrase for the final part of a set of rhymes

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

RHYMING

- * Therefore, the most important part of the punchline will typically be the rhyming word since it's at the end.
- *THIS IS ALSO APPLICABLE FOR DIALOGUE: Put the most operative word or phrase as close to the end of a line as possible

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

RHYMING

THE RHYME FAKEOUT:

“Come Out of the Dumpster”



TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

RHYMING

Try differently-spelled rhyming words

like “done” and “won”

or “seen” and “bean”

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

WORK BACKWARD

If you know what you want to say with a funny line, write it into the second part of the rhyme first, then work backward.

It's always easier than writing a setup and then having to make the punchline rhyme.

Come up with the purest version of your punchline, then set it up with something that rhymes.

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

PROSE VERSION

It's always ok to make a regular prose (dialogue or monologue) version of what you're trying to write

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

INTERJECT RANDOM NONSENSE SYLLABLES

(cheap, but effective)

“Sha la la”

“Doo bee doo”

“Ooooooooooh”

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

FUNNY VISUALIZATION

Make the audience visualize something funny in their heads.

Often, it'll be funnier *to them* than anything you could put on stage.



TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

KEY CHANGE OUT OF THE BRIDGE OR B
SECTION INTO YOUR FINAL CHUNK

(Also cheap. Also effective.)

TIPS, TRICKS, AND RULES OF THUMB!

UNEXPECTED CHARACTER FOR THIS SONG

OR

UNEXPECTED SONG FOR THIS CHARACTER

“Up There”



DON'TS

DON'T BLOW IT ALL ON THE FIRST VERSE

If you write the funniest part first, make it the 2nd or 3rd verse and

WORK BACKWARD!

Ideally, keep topping the previous verse each time.

DON'TS

DON'T DO THAT CUTESY "IT'S HARD TO
RHYME WITH _____" JOKE

Or the "nothing rhymes with _____"

Or "I can't think of a rhyme for _____"

(unless it's a song about a songwriter or poet writing)

It's lazy, telegraphs a lack of care put into your work

DON'TS

WRITE EDGY COMEDY FOR A MUSICAL IN DEVELOPMENT

It will spoil like cottage cheese on a dashboard

(Exceptions: A standalone song for immediate use)

DON'TS

CAREFUL OF TOPICAL HUMOR IN A MUSICAL

It will ALSO age quickly

(Exception: Standalone song for immediate use, a song for a topical ,
or a line you're ok with it changing later on)

DON'TS

DON'T TELEGRAPH RHYMES

“There was a great big bully, he pushed me on the grass

And when...”

DON'TS

DON'T WRITE A SHOW WITH NO LAUGHS

Even if it's just “a few laughs in the right places”.

A musical with no joy is a drag.

THERE IS AN EXCEPTION TO EVERY RULE OF THUMB!

SOMETIMES, SOMETHING JUST *WORKS*.

WHEN IN DOUBT...

BORROW!

STEAL!

EMULATE!

No one's asking you to reinvent the wheel.

Q & A