

Unit 29: Stand-up Comic Technique

Unit code:	A/502/5126
QCF Level 3:	BTEC National
Credit value:	10
Guided learning hours:	60

● Aim and purpose

This unit will enable learners to study the techniques of past performers and to develop the necessary performance skills and comic techniques to perform stand-up routines themselves.

● Unit introduction

Stand-up comedy has emerged in recent years as an exciting performance style, constantly changing and updating itself as the range of practitioners and their particular chosen styles of delivery evolve. Some performers see this genre as a useful additional skill in an environment where performance work is often hard to secure, many professionals who work in this area later graduate into other styles of performance work, often building on the techniques which they have developed for stand-up routines.

Learners will explore key practitioners and those who have influenced the stand-up comedy movement to develop comedy performance skills and techniques and the essence of a comedy 'act'.

Learners will investigate a range of stand up comedy techniques. The unit gives learners the opportunity to build a portfolio of research, improve their skills and take part in performance work devised through their development of material.

Learners will examine the origins of comedy and specifically the traditions of social comedy in the guise of the fool or jester in the courts of Europe. They will look at comedy genres (parody, satire, farce, physical), elements and structure of jokes (set-up, punch line, payoff moment), elements of comedic rehearsal and presentation (expectation/violation, pace, delivery, context, physicality, sound effects) and a vocabulary of related terms. Learners will look at the extended comic monologue as well as the joke sequence routine. They will also gain some insight into the specific problems and advantages of comedy on radio and television. Some time will be given to improvisation and the ad-lib.

Learners should take part in at least two stand-up comedy routines, each lasting 2-3 minutes.

● Learning outcomes

On completion of this unit a learner should:

- 1 Know the key influences in stand-up and alternative comedy
- 2 Be able to develop stand-up comedy skills and techniques
- 3 Be able to select, develop and refine stand-up comedy material
- 4 Be able to take part in the performance of stand-up comedy.

Unit content

1 Know the key influences in stand up and alternative comedy

Current practitioners: eg Ross Noble, Eddie Izzard, Billy Connolly, Lenny Henry, Victoria Wood, Bill Bailey, Ken Dodd, Jack Dee, Jimmy Carr, Rhona Cameron, Ben Elton, Stephen K Amos, Robin Williams, Reginald D Hunter, Jo Brand, Lucy Porter, Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, George Carlin, Rory Bremner, Al Murray, Omid Djalili, Sacha Baron Cohen, Steve Coogan, Harry Enfield, Johnny Vegas

Past practitioners: eg Morecambe and Wise, Les Dawson, Richard Pryor, Tommy Cooper, Bill Hicks

Extended monologists: eg Ruth Draper, Garrison Keillor, Shelley Berman; social comment comics eg Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby, Chris Rock; sight gag comics eg Red Skelton, Lucille Ball; improvisational comics eg Sid Caesar, Lily Tomlin, Elaine May

Context: eg social, cultural, historical, political, artistic, economic

2 Be able to develop stand-up comedy skills and techniques

Physical, vocal and acting skills: body language; characterisation; microphone techniques; vocal and physical exaggeration; timing; style of delivery; stagecraft; stage presence

Comedy technique: eg audience interaction, heckling, observation skills, set-up and payoff, satire, mimicry, solo material and sketch writing, opening patter, delivery, rant-and-rave technique, formula gag

3 Be able to select, develop and refine stand-up comedy material

Stimulus: explore ideas related to sources eg text, props, pictures, found objects, music, voice, song, words, stories, masks, costume, poetry, paintings, sculpture, buildings, topical events, news

Manipulation: use of words; action and movement combined; technical involvement; other media eg live sound and recorded sound, multi-media

Development: taught material; original material; motifs; themes; physical style

Create: devise; adapt; experiment; rehearse; appraise; test; modify

Context: nature of material; potential audience; types/functions of venues; formal/informal relationship

Constraints: health and safety; copyright; legal; technical; financial; access; location; resources

4 Be able to take part in the performance of stand-up comedy

Performance skills: use of body; voice; acting; instrument; equipment; materials; props; communication and interaction; timing; participation; energy and focus; responsiveness

Presentation of ideas: eg verbal, visual, textual, audio, physical, technical, vocal, musical

Assessment and grading criteria

In order to pass this unit, the evidence that the learner presents for assessment needs to demonstrate that they can meet all the learning outcomes for the unit. The assessment criteria for a pass grade describe the level of achievement required to pass this unit.

Assessment and grading criteria		
To achieve a pass grade the evidence must show that the learner is able to:	To achieve a merit grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass criteria, the learner is able to:	To achieve a distinction grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass and merit criteria, the learner is able to:
P1 describe contemporary stand-up comedy, recognising key influences, methods and techniques [IE]	M1 explain contemporary stand-up comedy, recognising key influences, working methods and techniques	D1 analyse contemporary stand-up comedy, recognising key influences, working methods and techniques
P2 apply physical, vocal, acting and comedy skills competently when developing performances and in performance [CT]	M2 apply physical, vocal, acting and comedy skills competently and with style when developing performances and in performance	D2 apply physical, vocal, acting and comedy skills with ease, lack of inhibition and presence when developing performances and in performance
P3 develop and shape ideas and materials in practical comedy workshops, with guidance and support [RL, CT]	M3 develop and shape ideas and materials in practical comedy workshops, with minimum guidance and support	D3 develop and shape ideas and materials in practical comedy workshops independently
P4 perform stand-up comedy, demonstrating appropriate creative skills with discernible focus, concentration and commitment. [TW, EP]	M4 perform stand-up comedy, clearly demonstrating integrated creative skills with positive focus, concentration and commitment.	D4 perform stand-up comedy, demonstrating the flexible application of a high level of integrated creative skills, focus, concentration and commitment.

PLTS: This summary references where applicable, in the square brackets, the elements of the personal, learning and thinking skills applicable in the pass criteria. It identifies opportunities for learners to demonstrate effective application of the referenced elements of the skills.

Key	IE – independent enquirers	RL – reflective learners	SM – self-managers
	CT – creative thinkers	TW – team workers	EP – effective participators

Essential guidance for tutors

Delivery

The unit should be delivered through a combination of classroom and practical workshops where learners create and explore material as well as analyse the key influences of stand up comedy. Learners should be encouraged to use a working diary and/or portfolio for their research and development work.

Delivering stand-up comedy can be more daunting than almost any other kind of performing. Learners will need to gain the confidence to perform in front of an audience. It is a good idea to begin exposing learners to short performances before sympathetic audiences early in the unit. As soon as learners have created a short routine, they should be encouraged to stand-up and perform it. It is only through trying out material and subsequently refining it that learners will be able to develop their skills. They should be given opportunities to learn by using the material of other stand-up comedians, perhaps adapted to their own circumstances, as well as creating and developing their own material. They should also be given opportunities to develop routines in pairs, in addition to developing solo material. It will be important for them to understand the difference between themselves and the persona which is presented in performance.

Learners will need to understand the basic structure of jokes, the way that a set-up leads to a punchline (or payoff) and how contrast and surprise lie at the heart of much comedy. They will need to learn how the expectations of an audience are manipulated and exploited through the structure of jokes and will benefit from being able to structure their own original jokes, based on the patterns which they have observed. Learners should experiment with increasingly long 'sets', where they develop comic monologues and stories. They will need to be taught various skills of presentation, including microphone skills and the handling of any relevant props. They should be encouraged to explore the physical and vocal range and qualities of character, including the appearance; this should include appropriate costume. Learners will need to consider the significance of the comic persona and its closeness to or distance from the personality of the performer; for example, a performer like Billy Connolly might be seen as being close to their own personality, Jack Dee an extension of some of his curmudgeonly and cynical aspects, but performers like Sacha Baron Cohen (with Ali G, Borat and Brüno) or Steve Coogan (with Alan Partridge) might be seen to have created quite separate personae. The creation of comic personae is therefore something learners should consider in developing and refining their own work. An awareness of a range of genres and styles of comedy will allow learners to try their hand at more than one. They should become aware of the differences in performing for different media, especially radio and television. Opportunities should be given to improvise, including ad-libbing, and to develop a range of strategies for dealing with hecklers. As well as developing their own persona, they will need to operate as one half of a comedy duo, constructing the relevant persona in relation to the other half and developing the relationship as well as generating the material.

For the understanding of the key influences in stand-up comedy learners will need to carry out research into the influences of at least three practitioners and artists, past and present, together with research of at least two other factors that have influenced its development. Learners should research working methods and techniques, aesthetics, style and the themes and content of practitioners' and artists' work. The particular nature of 'alternative' comedy should be explored along with the contexts which gave rise to it. The work of particular artists should be related to relevant social, cultural, political, historical and economic conditions and notes on these should be maintained in the log (which could be presented as part of continuous assessment). To gain a perspective on the role of the comic (and the function of comedy) learners should explore the role and function of the court fool, or jester, and its relationship to modern comedy.

Outline learning plan

The outline learning plan has been included in this unit as guidance and can be used in conjunction with the programme of suggested assignments.

The outline learning plan demonstrates one way in planning the delivery and assessment of this unit.

Topic and suggested assignments/activities and/assessment
Introduction to unit content and organisation and the nature of stand-up comedy.
Workshops developing a sense of truth and commitment in delivering material.
Initial (unassessed) solo performance of original or derived material.
Feedback session.
Workshops developing attitude, intention, persona and selecting and developing relevant comic material (see <i>Assignment 5</i> below).
Assignment 1: Solo Stand-up Performance (P2, M2, D2, P4, M4, D4)
Performance of short solo stand-up comedy routine, using original or derived material (or a combination of the two).
Feedback session.
Study of and research into significant contemporary stand-up practitioners. Study of historical development of the 'comic performer' and the associated contexts and constraints.
During this section, learners will continue to develop their own material.
Assignment 2: Presentation/Demonstration (P1, M1, D1)
Presentation individually or in pairs on a significant figure (or duo) in recent/contemporary stand-up comedy. The presentation should feature the live re-creation of some elements of the original act.
Feedback session.
Workshop sessions, experimenting with the development and refinement of comic material in writing and performance, including the selection of language and the development of appropriate vocal and physical skills. Focus on performance work for duos, creating the relationship and interaction (see <i>Assignment 5</i> below).
Assignment 3: Duo Stand-up Performance (P2, M2, D2, P4, M4, D4)
Performance of duo stand-up comedy routine, using original or derived material (or a combination of the two).
Feedback session.
Workshop sessions: experimenting with a range of possibilities for developing and extending solo and duo acts, including for example props, effects, music. Focus on interaction with, and handling of the audience (see <i>Assignment 5</i> below).
Assignment 4: Stand-up Performance (P2, M2, D2, P4, M4, D4)
Performance of solo or duo stand-up comedy routine for a live audience, using original material.
Assignment 5: Continuous Assessment (P3, M3, D3)
(Supported, for example, by video evidence, logs and witness statements) of developmental work in the workshop sessions.
Feedback and plenary session.

Assessment

The assessment regime needs to allow for the development process; it is likely that learners will gain confidence with increasing experience throughout this unit and perform with greater assurance and facility. Two of the criteria recognise that learners at all levels will need guidance and support while developing their skills in what can be a daunting form of performance. Grading criteria 2 and 3 make specific reference to 'workshop situations' during which learners may be assessed on material and skills which they are developing in an atmosphere more conducive to experimentation than the arena of public performance; Grading criteria 2 must also be assessed in performance. Whilst learners will need to be nurtured and supported, they will hone their performance skills in encounters with live audiences. The programme of suggested assignments above provides two formal assessment points for performance, both before a live audience, Elements of performance may also be assessed in the presentation/demonstration for grading criteria 1. Learners' development is also assessed continuously throughout the unit culminating in the final assignment. It will be helpful for tutors to develop a systematic method of capturing and recording individual achievement as evidence may occur in workshops, performances and presentation/demonstrations. Further evidence may be provided by a log in which learners will record their increasing knowledge and awareness of their personal development throughout the unit. The log may also include notes on key influences on stand-up and alternative comedy. It should contain reflection and evaluation of learners' own developmental and performance work. Selected workshops and other developmental sessions should be recorded on video/DVD and be used as additional evidence

For grading criterion 1, learners will need to show their knowledge of key influences in stand up and alternative comedy; this may be conducted through a presentation and demonstration (individually or in pairs/small groups) on a significant figure (or duo) in recent/contemporary stand-up comedy, although this might be assessed through a written account or supported with evidence in the learner's log. In addition, evidence of the knowledge of these key influences may also be assessed through observations of practical workshop explorations.

For P1, learners will be able to give a clear description of the comic persona and comic material associated with an influential stand-up artist or comedy duo. They will be able to convey some sense of the distinctive nature of the work and why it may have been influential in the history of stand-up and recognise relevant social, cultural and historical contexts to the artist's work. A demonstration can be given to capture the spirit of the original act for an audience to appreciate the nature of the comedy.

For M1, learners will be able to offer some explanation of the workings of the relevant act, showing how the structure of the act or the routine achieved its effect on an audience. Any demonstration will focus on examples which illustrate this explanation and it will be clear that the demonstration itself convincingly illustrates the point being made. They will have a clear awareness of the nature of the influence which the artist/duo exercised in the history of stand-up and be able to explain this placing the artist within social or historical contexts as appropriate.

For D1, learners will show the capacity to analyse the work of the artist/duo, showing an appreciation of both the detail and the overall shape of the act. There will be a clear sense of the distinctive quality of the artist/duo, the methods by which their comic universe is created, and of the nature and extent of their influence. There may be a successful attempt to place the artist in a particular social or historical context as part of an analysis of their distinctive quality. Any demonstration will be accurate and effective, clearly illustrating this quality.

For grading criterion 2, comedy performance will be assessed through rehearsal and participation in at least two performances. Learners should have a sustained involvement of at least two to three minutes in these performances. Evidence may be recorded on video/DVD and gathered through tutor observation and by peer assessment. Live performance needs an audience; while this may be an audience of their peers within the group, it may also be an audience which contains a wider public. Additional evidence may come from any demonstration to fulfil grading criteria 1.

For P2, learners will display a range of the necessary skills to make them effective performers in stand up. Vocal, physical, acting and comedy skills will relate to the comic persona and the delivery of the material. Their material will be audible, and delivered with sufficient vocal inflexion to make the pointing of significant lines clear; physical work will give some support to the material and acting skills will be evident in the creation and maintenance of a straightforward comic persona. There will be sufficient sense of timing to add effect to key comic moments. There may be moments of inconsistency and uncertainty, however, and not all skills will necessarily have been developed to the same level.

For M2, learners will have combined the range of necessary skills into a consistent performance. There will be a sense of conscious control of vocal, physical and acting skills in the creation of the comic persona and a clear sense of comic timing will be in evidence. Their overall competence in these skills areas will result in an audience feeling entertained, being able to focus on the material rather than the performer.

For D2, learners will demonstrate the ability to integrate the range of necessary skills into a convincing and persuasive performance. They will exercise a subtle control over the skills to create a performance which effectively exploits the potential of the material. Their skill and sense of ease will create confidence in an audience.

For grading criterion 3, learners will develop their own material for performance in workshops. They will create material and then refine it through trial performances, adding, subtracting and changing on the basis of experience and advice from the tutor and their peers. Evidence for this work will be provided by participation in workshops (and tutor observation) but learners will also maintain a log in which they record the development of their material.

For P3, learners will demonstrate the ability to create some of their own comic material, or to adapt the comic material of others sufficiently to make it effectively their own. They will have some ideas about how to refine and structure the material to make it more effective and will be able to put these into practice. They will need guidance and support to enable them to do this.

For M3, learners will demonstrate the ability to learn through experience in refining and structuring the material they have generated. They will have a range of ideas of their own, but will benefit from occasional guidance and support.

For D3, learners will show creativity in generating their own material and will have an extensive range of ideas about how to develop and re-structure it to improve its effect. In doing this, they will be able to make accurate independent judgements about their material.

Grading criterion 4 relates to the effectiveness of the learner in performance; in this context, this means public or formal performance rather than performance in a workshop setting. Performances should be recorded on video/DVD.

For P4, learners will demonstrate a degree of confidence and commitment to their material, together with a range of skills which support their performance. Not all the performance will be sustained at an equal level of concentration and not all skills will be equally developed.

For M4, learners will demonstrate a positive approach to their performance, with their confidence and commitment generating a similar confidence in the audience. A range of skills will be effectively applied in performance, evidently enhancing the material. Concentration will be maintained throughout.

For D4, learners will demonstrate an effective integration of skills in a convincing performance, showing the ability to concentrate fully on both the material and the audience and to respond flexibly when required.

Programme of suggested assignments

The table below shows a programme of suggested assignments that cover the pass, merit and distinction criteria in the assessment and grading grid. This is for guidance and it is recommended that centres either write their own assignments or adapt any Edexcel assignments to meet local needs and resources.

Criteria covered	Assignment title	Scenario	Assessment method
P2, M2, D2, P4, M4, D4	Solo Stand-up Performance	Performance of sequence of original or derived comic material (or a combination of the two) before a live audience. This should last at least 2-3 minutes.	Performance (recorded on video/DVD).
P1, M1, D1	Presentation/ Demonstration	Presentation/demonstration, individually or in pairs on a significant figure (or duo) in recent/contemporary stand-up comedy.	Presentation/demonstration (recorded on video/DVD).
P2, M2, D2, P4, M4, D4	Duo Stand-up Performance	Performance of duo stand-up comedy routine, using original or derived material (or a combination of the two) before a live audience. This should last at least 2-3 minutes.	Performance (recorded on video/DVD).
P3, M3, D3	Continuous Assessment	Throughout the unit, learners will contribute to a range of exercises, workshops and development sessions. Learners will maintain a log, demonstrating their involvement and their development, while the tutor will maintain ongoing records of their contributions and progress.	Observation (including video/ DVD evidence). Log/other written evidence.

Links to National Occupational Standards, other BTEC units, other BTEC qualifications and other relevant units and qualifications

This unit forms part of the BTEC Performing and Production Arts sector suite. This unit has particular links with the following unit titles in the BTEC Performing and Production Arts suite:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Preparing Performing Arts Work	The Development of Drama	Developing Voice for the Actor
Presenting Performing Arts Work	Acting Skills and Techniques	Drama Improvisation
		Audio Performance Acting
		Film and TV Acting
		Storytelling as Performance

Essential resources

It will be essential to have access to a reasonably equipped performance area, as well as to adequate rehearsal and workshop spaces. Access to relevant sources of research, including books and the internet will be essential. A range of videos/DVDs of stand-up comic artists in performance will be an essential resource. Relevant props and costume will have to be obtained on an ad hoc basis. Access to microphones linked to a working sound system will be necessary, as will video/DVD recording and playback equipment.

Employer engagement and vocational contexts

An understanding of the place of stand-up comedy in the performing arts industry and the operation of different types of venues will help learners to place their work in a vocational context. There may be opportunities for learners to attend live performances by stand-up comedians in local venues, in regional theatres or in large city venues. It may be possible to bring aspiring or even more established stand-up comedians into the centre to run workshops or to conduct Q and A sessions with learners.

Indicative reading for learners

Textbooks

Allen T – *Attitude: Wanna Make Something of It?* (Gothic Image, 2002) ISBN 9780906362563

Cook W – *The Comedy Store: The Club that Changed British Comedy* (Little, Brown, 2001)
ISBN 9780316857925

Dean G – *Step by Step to Stand-up Comedy* (Greenwood Press, 2000) ISBN 9780325001791

Double O – *Getting the Joke: The Art of Stand-up Comedy* (Methuen Performance Books, 2005)
ISBN 9780413774767

Double O – *Stand-up: On Being a Comedian* (Methuen, 1997) ISBN 9780413703200

Schwensen D – *How to Be a Working Comic: An Insider's Guide to a Career in Stand-up Comedy*
(Backstage Books, 1999) ISBN 9780823088140

Vorhaus J – *The Comic Toolbox: How to be Funny Even If You're Not* (Silman James Press, 1994)
ISBN 9781879505216

DVDs

Most current stand-up performers will have performances recorded on DVD and these will be readily available.

Website

www.comedy-zone.net/standup/index.htm Comedy Zone

Delivery of personal, learning and thinking skills

The table below identifies the opportunities for personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) that have been included within the pass assessment criteria of this unit.

Skill	When learners are ...
Independent enquirers	researching recent or contemporary stand-up artists for presentation/demonstration
Creative thinkers	developing material for performance and adapting it in reaction to specific performance conditions
Reflective learners	writing in their log, reflecting on their own development and achievements in workshops and performances
Team workers	performing routines with others or as part of a team presenting a joint performance of stand-up comedy
Effective participators	taking part in performances featuring their own work and that of others.

Although PLTS are identified within this unit as an inherent part of the assessment criteria, there are further opportunities to develop a range of PLTS through various approaches to teaching and learning.

Skill	When learners are ...
Independent enquirers	researching the background to particular artists, contemporary or historical, to particular venues and to movements in comedy
Creative thinkers	devising and adapting material, or improvising material
Reflective learners	discussing their work and the work of others, reflecting on achievement, method and technique
Team workers	supporting other performers, technicians and others in a production team in preparation for and during performances
Self-managers	managing time successfully in creating material individually or in a pair for defined performance occasions
Effective participators	taking part in a range of activities from warm-ups to skills sessions.

● Functional Skills – Level 2

Skill	When learners are ...
ICT – Find and select information	
Access, search for, select and use ICT-based information and evaluate its fitness for purpose	researching performers, venues and movements/periods in the history of comedy
English	
Speaking and listening – make a range of contributions to discussions and make effective presentations in a wide range of contexts	giving a presentation/demonstration on a recent/contemporary performer of stand-up comedy discussing reactions to the work of a range of stand-up comedians or to the work of their peers in the group
Writing – write documents, including extended writing pieces, communicating information, ideas and opinions, effectively and persuasively	maintaining a log of personal learning and development throughout the unit.