

2400 JOKES  
TO BRIGHTEN  
YOUR SPEECHES

Robert Orben



Doubleday

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Also by Robert Orben

2100 LAUGHS FOR ALL OCCASIONS

2500 JOKES TO START 'EM LAUGHING

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ONE-LINER COMEDY

THE AD-LIBBER'S HANDBOOK

THE JOKE-TELLER'S HANDBOOK

ORBEN'S CURRENT COMEDY

(a topical humor service for public speakers)

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# 2400 Jokes to Brighten Your Speeches

*Robert Orben*

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# INTRODUCTION

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“What are the odds?” It’s a frequently asked question. It’s perfectly normal to consider the risk-reward ratio in any new undertaking. What are the odds on a horse winning, a candidate being elected, a stock going up, a business succeeding? We weigh the evidence and then act accordingly.

So what are the odds on getting a laugh? If you’re sold on the use of humor in communication, beware the tendency to be oversold. While humor can lighten and enlighten a situation—it may not be appropriate in every situation. The sensitive communicator should weigh the humor pros and cons of every speaking engagement. It’s one way to keep your cream of wit from curdling.

First, let’s consider the time of day. I’ve found that the chances of getting a laugh improve as the day grows older. Despite rumors to the contrary, most of us are imbued with the work ethic. Early in the morning there is an inbred motivation to get things moving, to accomplish. But humor calls for a certain amount of playfulness and relaxation. And so humor is a hard commodity to sell at breakfast meetings and midmorning events.

There are exceptions. If a joke is relevant and speaks to a common concern, it can work even at sunrise. I attended a breakfast at which President Ford was the speaker. The man who introduced him said that in his own military career, in World War II, he had spent four years getting up before the crack of dawn. And it wasn’t his favorite hour. And so he vowed that when he got out of the army it would take the President of the United States to ever get him up at six o’clock in the morning again. A pause and then he added, “It’s six o’clock. Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States!” Everybody in the room could relate to the thought and it worked. And so, if you have something that’s right on the button for the time of the event, and the audience—you can get laughs from an early morning group. But it’s much more of a challenge than later in the day.

Luncheon meetings and midafternoon sessions are worlds better for humor. The day is half over. Some amount of work has been completed. The trauma of commerce has been soothed by a 3-to-1 martini lunch. People are more receptive to fun and more willing to reward themselves with the luxury of a laugh.

But the best time of all is dinnertime and the evening hours. The battles of the day have been fought—and either won or lost—but, for the time being, they’re over. People lean back and want to savor the things that make them feel good.

Laughter is one of them. Providing the Happy Hour is just happy and not uproarious, dinners and banquets are ideal vehicles for humor. We are conditioned to look on the evening as our time to enjoy. Dinner is served at eight. Serve the humor soon after.

The one storm warning to be aware of: the evening event that goes on too long. We’ve all survived through them. They’re fun from seven to nine. Pleasant from nine to eleven. Torture from

eleven to midnight. At every evening event there is a psychologically optimum time to pack up the table tents and go home. If the program goes beyond this, even if you've prepared the funniest remarks and sagest speech ever—'tis best to throw in the towel and cut both your time and losses. Say something like "I've been sitting up here so long, the spotlight has faded my suit." Conclude with a sixty-second update of your speech and then lead the rush to the door. You'll be the hit of the evening.

Another important factor in the success of humor is the physical setting of the meeting or dinner. Get as close to the audience as possible. If the lectern is set far back from the first row of seats or tables, move it up. If you can't move it, work in front of it. Humor calls for involvement—attachment rather than detachment. What you are striving for is a one-to-one eye-contact relationship with every member of the audience.

Some meeting planners either lose sight of the need for a physically close relationship between speaker and listener—or accept imposed conditions that make such a relationship difficult. A group of 200 in a meeting room that seats 500 is bad news. You just walk into that room and you sense failure. Two hundred may be the most attendees they've ever had but in a room that holds 500 the audience looks like a quota that hasn't been met.

Further, laughter is a social exercise. If you hear the person next to you laughing out loud you are more apt to do the same. And so it's important that your room be just big enough to encompass your group—and the number of chairs available just enough to seat them. Better to scrounge for more chairs from another location if they are needed than to have your audience scattered about the room like chips on a chocolate cookie. Your listeners should be able to relate to you and also to each other. The natural impulse upon hearing an appropriate relevant joke is to nudge someone in agreement. You've got to have someone close enough to nudge.

Laughter feeds on laughter. That's why most TV shows have laugh tracks. The laugh track of the capable speaker is an audience responding to a properly written and told joke. If the audience is seated in a room just large enough to hold it comfortably, the laughter bounces off the walls and reverberates throughout the room. It becomes contagious. It *sounds* as if everybody is having such a good time, if you're not laughing maybe *you're* wrong.

In essence, effective humor should be like a party with everyone joining in the fun. But sometimes a party suffers if there are too many or too few people. The same holds true when you're looking for laughs. If an audience is too small, each member is more aware of the others and, as a result, feels less comfortable. Emotional protection is provided by the crowd and that is lost in a group of five or ten. Since laughter calls for a certain amount of "letting go," the smaller the group the harder the going.

Conversely, when your audience numbers in the thousands, it just isn't possible to maintain eye contact and a sense of togetherness. A curious mix of reactions greets comedy performed in the huge show rooms of Las Vegas or in the mammoth civic auditoriums now being built. Most of the laughter comes from the semicircle of audience within easy eye contact of the

performer. The rest may be enjoying the performance, but they aren't obligated to show it. And if you study the audience in the far reaches of the second balcony, even comedians and superstars are being met with silence.

Speakers can learn a lesson from this: lighten or eliminate the humor load whenever audiences are too large for personal interaction. The jokes that *do* work before a large mass of listeners tend to be jokes that speak to a fervently held common interest or concern. If it's a political rally, needling the opposition never fails. If it's a graduation exercise, belittling the traditional sports rival is surefire. But more general humor tends to be lost in and by the crowd.

Outdoor events are another problem for the joke-teller—and the serious speaker as well. The attention and the interest span of outdoor audiences are limited. They're with you for five or ten minutes and then their interest is off and running with the first passing airplane or child crying. Jokes suffer because of the absence of a roof and four walls to contain the sound. As a result, even a big laugh sounds weak as it wafts off in all directions. A good general rule is to follow the KISSSSS formula for outdoor events: Keep it Short, Simple, Sincere, and Serious.

Finally, let's talk about the audience—the focus of any speaker's attention. As any performer will tell you, there is no constancy in audiences. They may look the same but the chemistry of audiences—their interest and receptivity—varies greatly. The same jokes, the same speech, the same performance can get a standing ovation one night and yawns the next. For six years I was a writer on the Red Skelton TV show in Hollywood. We had a sign on our office wall that cut short all complaints about any problems we encountered. It said: IF IT WAS EASY, YOU WOULDN'T BE MAKING ALL THIS MONEY.

Assessing an audience is neither easy nor an exact science—but certain generalities, based on experience, can be established. If I had to rate the receptivity of audiences, all-female audiences would head the list; male-female audiences would place second; all-male audiences third. Obviously, each group can be and is responsive to humor—but each requires a slightly different approach.

Without going into psychological theories, I have found that audiences of women are apt to be more relaxed and have a greater willingness to be entertained. Providing the humor isn't sexist, they respond to a wide variety of subject matter.

The mixed-gender audience offers a little more resistance. The couples respond to the material and to the speaker, but they are also aware of their partner's reaction to the performance and their partner's reaction to their own response. General humor works, but a little more attention to material that speaks to the audience's shared interests is wise.

The all-male audience may present the biggest challenge in doing humor. Humor is power. Humor is control. When we laugh, we temporarily give ourselves over to the person who makes us laugh. A lifetime of macho conditioning makes a male reluctant to do this. And s



the best humor for all-male audiences are jokes that bond the speaker to the audience and take a supportive and affirming humorous stance on subjects of common and intense interest: sports, politics, shared problems.

Just as the capacity to enjoy humor improves as the day grows older, it also improves as the audience grows older. Young audiences—those in their teens and early twenties—have a limited range of interests and experience. Their laughter is more a vote than a sign of enjoyment. If a joke supports the traditional rebellions of youth, it'll work. Antiauthoritarianism; antiestablishment; prodrug; prosex; iconoclastic put-downs are what turn on many young audiences.

As people grow older and more secure—or at least become less intimidated by the newness of life—they tend to be more accepting of their own foibles and foolishness. They see more of the humor that is in each and every one of our lives. And so perhaps the best audiences of all are the older ones. Those who have made an accommodation with life and have mulched any chips that might have been on their shoulders. Today, tonight, this meeting, this show, is for enjoyment. Let's get on with it!

The mood of the audience is the ultimate key to your success. One of the most difficult nights I ever experienced in a theater happened in 1962. I was a writer on the Jack Paar prime-time TV show and Jack was taping a show on the night the Cuban missile crisis was coming to a head. Russian ships were approaching the U.S. naval blockade points and the expected confrontation could well have led to World War III. There wasn't a member of Jack's audience who wasn't fearful that this night might end with a nuclear holocaust.

As it happened, Russia blinked first—and, frankly, so did Comedy. Jack Paar's talent, charisma, and sensitivity kept the show and the evening afloat, but it had to be one of the most subdued audiences in history. Because the primary purpose of Jack's show was comedy, there was no way to sidestep the humor. But there are times when a speaker is faced with this same type of preoccupied, inwardly directed audience. If so, forget humor. The odds are against it.

So, before you use humor, consider the odds—and if you can, try to stack them in your favor. In Las Vegas it's the way to beat the house. In speaking, it's the way to bring down the house.

And now please turn to and enjoy more than 2400 jokes that are odds-on to brighten your speeches, your conversation, and your reading.

Bob Orbe

# AIRLINE FARES

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God must have loved airline fares. He made so many of them.

Have you been out to the airport lately? They now have an express line for flights with s prices or less.

Airlines now have nine basic fares: FIRST CLASS, ECONOMY, TOURIST, COACH, NIGHT COACH, SAVER, SUPER SAVER, STANDBY, and MAKE-US-AN-OFFER.

Where else but in America could you spend \$229 and be called a “super saver”?

And I’ll never understand first-class fares. If you fly to Europe, you pay another \$800 and what do you get? Fourteen inches more of leg room. I mean, who can stretch that good?

I don’t want to complain about the difference between coach and first-class fares, but I once flew first class and when the stewardess came over I whispered something in her ear. She just smiled and said, “You got that when you bought your ticket.”

The airlines think of everything. They’ve now made it possible for those of you who have always wanted to go to Europe in the worst possible way to do so. It’s called Standby.

I finally figured out why the airlines call it “Standby.” That’s what you do at the gate as the plane takes off.

As you know, November 23rd is a very special day for America. It’s when the last of the Standby passengers come home from Europe.

# AIRLINES

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America is where we have an airline that's United and a government that isn't.

It's all in the way you look at it. All of my life I've flown in company planes. The companies they belonged to were American, T.W.A., and Delta.

I love to fly because stewardesses are really fun people. A stewardess is someone with a smile on her face, a sparkle in her eyes, and 300 little bottles of liquor in her pantry.

If you really want to irritate a stewardess, when she asks you to put your seat in an upright position, stand on your head.

Do you ever get the feeling that airline baggage handling was invented by Orville and Wilbur Wright?

## AIRLINE SEATING

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Scientists say you can't put more into a container than the container will hold. Now if we could only convince the people who design airline seats.

The airlines are crowding so many people into a plane, the newest economy fare calls for alternate-side-of-the-aisle breathing.

I love those planes that have the five seats in the middle, an aisle on either side, and the more seats. It's like flying to Europe in your dentist's waiting room.

In 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright invented a plane that only held one person. Now we have planes with *seats* that don't even hold one person.

The airlines are making seats that are so narrow, turning the other cheek isn't a virtue, it's a necessity.

I love to travel by plane. If you hear a pop, it's either a cork coming out of a bottle in first class or a passenger coming out of a seat in tourist class.

I don't mind the airlines crowding so many people into such narrow seats, but at least they could make it boy, girl, boy, girl. I have enough vices now I can't satisfy.

If airlines put people any closer together, they're going to have to do one of two things: either put saltpeter in the coffee or mirrors on the ceiling.

You don't know what it's like to spend seven hours flying to Europe sitting in the middle seat —and on either side of you are people with samurai elbows!

The captain says, "If you look to your right, you'll be able to see Paris and the Eiffel Tower." I look to my right and all I can see is an earring and wax!

The worst seat you can have on a plane is an aisle seat, because all the food and drinks and snacks have to go over you to get to the other passengers. And, as we all know, the only time airlines ever serve food is during a typhoon alert.... One time the person sitting in the window seat asked me what we were having for dinner. I said, "Wait a minute. I'll look at my lap!"

I'm firmly convinced that if God had meant us to have airline seating He never would have given us knees.

Airplanes are now divided into two sections: SMOKING and NO SMOKING. In Italy the planes are also divided into two sections: GARLIC and NO GARLIC.

# AIRPLANES

---

I understand the manufacturers of aircraft stand behind every plane they sell. I'd be more impressed if they stood under them.

Metal fatigue is when you talk about an important part wearing out. I get enough of that from my wife.

The big concern in airline circles is how the engines are mounted. Personally, I feel that what mechanics do in the privacy of their own hangars is their business.

Remember your first flight and how you spent the entire time looking out the window—watching, listening, and worrying about the engine? Remember your last flight and how you spent the entire time looking out the window—watching, listening, and worrying about the engine?

It used to be that I'd get on a plane and I'd be a white-knuckle flier. Now I'm close to albino.

And I'm not the only one. It's the first time I ever heard a stewardess offer coffee, tea, or Greyhound.

You can always tell the atheists in a plane. They wear little F.A.A. medals around their necks.

## ANTIQUES

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An antique shop always gives me the feeling I'm walking around in my wife's handbag.

My brother-in-law is never going to make it in the antique business. Yesterday he threw away a blotter that had been used at the signing of the Declaration of Independence—because John Hancock's signature was written backward.

He just paid \$500 for what has to be one of the most valuable historical documents of all time. Remember how Moses took down the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone? He bought the carbon copy!

I don't think that painting of Adam and Eve at the local art museum is too authentic. For instance, Adam is wearing a fig leaf with a zipper.

# APARTMENTS

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You know why they call them “luxury apartment houses”? After you pay the rent, you can’t afford any!

They do everything to make these new luxury apartment buildings the ultimate in refinement, good taste, and dignified living. For instance, the cornerstone says M-C-M-L-X-X-IV. That’s Latin for CURB YOUR DOG!

Have you looked at apartments lately? All the new buildings are forty stories high. Now you can get an apartment and a nosebleed at the same time!... I looked at one yesterday. It’s only two miles from shopping—straight down!

This building is so tall, I was riding up in the elevator and as we were going past the hundred and third floor I said, “Good Lord!” And a voice answered, “Yes?”

They’re putting up one building that’s so high, the elevators are by Boeing!

## ARMY

---

These will be great years for the Pentagon. To the average citizen, a stockpile of tanks, guns and missiles is frightening. To the Pentagon, it's Toys-R-Us.

I saw a picture of that new tank that can go 45 miles an hour, has 6-inch armor-plate, a 100 mm cannon—and, thanks to our defense budget, the army will have 10,000 of them by 1985. Not the tank, the picture.

This tank will cost \$1.1 million each—radio and heater extra.

I know that sounds like a lot of money but it isn't easy buying a tank. You ever kick a treadle?

There's got to be a way of reducing this price—cutting out some of the frills. I mean, does a 60-ton tank really need curb feelers?

Women should register for the draft because they're much healthier than men. When they get down for their physical, you never hear them coughing.

Obviously, women in the armed services have brought about some changes. For instance, creamed chipped beef on toast is now called by a rather strange name—creamed chipped beef on toast.

I think it's a mistake not to allow women to go into combat. Why let all those years of marriage go to waste?

I was never much of a soldier. My idea of a cadence count was: "Help! Two. Three. Four. Help! Two. Three. Four."

I could never get used to the army wardrobe. I mean, who wears olive-drab undershirts and olive-drab shorts? I looked like a sex symbol for frogs.

Now everything's changed. Now it's the "new army." I didn't realize how new until I went into the mess hall. The one with the strolling violinist.



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