

# Comedy Joke & Sketch Writing

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*DC 304/701; 405/710: 2013 Fall, Lecture/Online*



WEEK ONE: Thursday, September 12th, 2013

*"Introduction To Jokes & Sketch"*

(A)

**INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to Topics In Screenwriting: Comedy Joke And Sketch Writing. I have often thought that a good name for any course of study that attempts to teach comedy writing, might be “Dead Frogs,” based upon the E.B. White quote, “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.” And, even though he’s right (in a kind of New Yorker Magazine/Algonquin Roundtable sort of way), you and I have to try anyway. We’re obliged to try, especially since you seem keen to learn and I am certainly ready to try my best to teach. Here’s what I’m promising:

The student learns to write **monologue jokes** based on a week’s worth of front page news (1<sup>st</sup> week); then the student creates **desk piece** ideas (or pitches) for a specific, current talk host (2<sup>nd</sup> week), then the student creates **remote ideas** (or pitches) for said host (3<sup>rd</sup> week); then various **segment pitches**--two ideas that deal with the guests, the audience, the staff/crew, and the band (4<sup>th</sup> week); then we shift gears a little bit into sketch, with the writing of a “Saturday Night Live” **cold opening** (5<sup>th</sup> week); then writing two **opening monologues** (6<sup>th</sup> week); then a streamlined **Weekend Update** (7<sup>th</sup> week); two **commercial parodies**, and one **digital short** (7<sup>th</sup> week); a “live” sketch, **a parody of a current TV show** (8<sup>th</sup> week); and “live” sketch, **a parody of a current film** (9<sup>th</sup> week); then an SNL cast scene of five or more characters (10<sup>th</sup> week); and we end everything with the student rewriting and editing both their Talk Show Portfolio and their SNL Sketch Packet (11<sup>th</sup> week).

It’s my considered opinion that this class, Comedy Joke And Sketch Writing, is a logical first step toward attempting to gain proficiency in writing television comedy. My GPS guide through assembling the curriculum for this course is simple--what do I wish someone had told me when I was starting out. All of these are mere suggestions; I know only a little, and what I do know is constantly changing and being updated and tossed. At the moment I believe that we, as comedy writers, tend to succeed or fail based on our knowledge of the intrinsic qualities of a given medium. What exactly is a given thing? What is a joke, for instance? WTF? One learns pretty quickly that a funny line tends to trump everything, especially in the moment. Rarely is a funny line grammatically correct. Rarely are the people who craft funny lines even knowledgeable about grammar, or spelling for that matter. And rarely do funny lines tell an objective truth. It also tends to be very, very personal.

It’s a funny thing about personal stories and worldly quotes (be forewarned that I will be using far too many of them); sometimes those stories and/or quotes turn out not to be true at all, or unrecognizable from their truthful origins. I remember studying improvisation with the now legionary Del Close when I was an intern at The Second City in Chicago, and hearing a snippy coed from Northwestern point out that he’d contradicted himself. And Del, without missing a beat, quoted William Blake, “Yea, I contradict myself; I am large, I contain multitudes.” And then he went on to said something original that was hideously misogynist that I dare not quote.

Here's the truth about that quote though. It's not right. It's not the quote and it's not a quote from William Blake. Now, a variety of things could have happened. The fault might be mine of wrongly crediting Del with crediting William Blake; or, I may have heard it second hand; or, I may have made the whole thing up. The truth is, it's a Walt Whitman quote taken from his poem, "Song of Myself." I only know that because of Goggle. The exact quote is: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)." I only take time to mention this here, because I promise you, I will contradict myself, even though I do not contain multitudes.

(B)

OVERVIEW

**WEEK ONE: Thursday, September 12th, 2013**

*"Introduction To Jokes And Sketch"*

ASSIGNMENT: To write at least one two-liner per day, based entirely upon information gleaned from the front page of the Chicago Tribune starting with Friday, September 13th through Wednesday, September 19th.

**WEEK TWO: Thursday, September 20th, 2013**

*"To Pitch Concepts For Desk Pieces"*

ASSIGNMENT: Choose a talk show host for whom you wish to write, and review an episode of his or her show, paying special attention to the presentation of any and all desk pieces. Conceive and describe (in at least three sentences), eight separate desk pieces for your host. Script a two-minute version of your favorite.

**WEEK THREE: Thursday, September 27th, 2013**

*"To Pitch Concepts For Remote Ideas"*

ASSIGNMENT: Conceive and describe (in at least three sentences), eight separate remote ideas for your host. Script a two-minute version of your favorite.

**WEEK FOUR: Thursday, October 3rd, 2013**

*"To Pitch Concepts For Various Segment Ideas"*

ASSIGNMENT: Conceive and describe (in at least three sentences), eight separate segment ideas that involve (where applicable), two ideas that involve the guests, the audience, the staff and/or the crew and the band. Script a two-minute version of your favorite.

**WEEK FIVE: Thursday, October 10th, 2013**

*“Saturday Night Live and the Cold Opening”*

ASSIGNMENT: To write six more two-liners based upon a week’s worth of front page news; to write a Cold Opening scene based upon one of your two-liners; to watch an review next week’s episode of SNL.

**WEEK SIX: Thursday, October 17th, 2013**

*“You And Your Hero Host SNL”*

ASSIGNMENT: To write two opening monologues, the first as if you were hosting SNL and the second as if a favorite celebrity and/or hero were hosting.

**WEEK SEVEN: Thursday, October 24th, 2013**

*“A Streamlined Weekend Update”*

ASSIGNMENT: To write an original, streamlined version of Weekend Update containing: two (2) two-liners that can stand alone; two (2) two-liners with a photo payoff; an editorial comment by a character in the news; an editorial comment by a cast member speaking for themselves.

**WEEK EIGHT: Thursday, October 31st, 2013**

*“A Live Parody Of A Current TV Show”*

ASSIGNMENT: To write a scene that parody’s a current TV show—and script it for a live presentation within the friendly confines of Studio 8-H.

**WEEK NINE: Thursday, November 7th, 2013**

*“A Live Parody Of A Current Film”*

ASSIGNMENT: To write a scene that parody’s a current film—and script it for a live presentation within the friendly confines of Studio 8-H.

**WEEK TEN: Thursday, November 14th, 2013**

*“Cast Scene”*

ASSIGNMENT: To write one (1) scene comprised of five or more characters.

**WEEK ELEVEN: Thursday, November 21st, 2013**

*“Rewrites And Submission”*

ASSIGNMENT: To rewrite and edit all material from weeks one through four that constitute a Talk Show Portfolio; rewrite and edit all material from weeks five through ten, that constitute an SNL Sketch Packet. Turn in hard copies of both at the end of class. Happy Holidays!

**(C)****TALK SHOW PORTFOLIOS**

The first four weeks of this class, Comedy Joke And Sketch Writing, is geared toward the writing and re-writing of the basic elements that go into the writing of a television talk show. The student will start at the very beginning, two-liners based upon the news. Later, during the sketch portion, the student will begin to construct monologues. The student will then move on to the other staples of a television talk show (i.e. the pitching of ideas for desk pieces, remotes ideas, as well as audience interaction, etc...).

At week five, we shift gears from the student thinking in terms of a cast of one (i.e. any talk show host) to an entire ensemble, namely "Saturday Night Live," and all the things that go into a typical SNL Sketch Packet. There's a big difference between these two kinds of writing; as I said, with a talk show you're mostly writing very presentational material and usually for a cast of one and the goal is a combination of: the host's voice + the writer's POV + the spirit of the times. With SNL, the writer is suddenly able to create from scratch entire universe. He or she is completely in charge of the who, what and where.

So that's where we are heading, step-by-step, week-by-week, without rushing anything, we take it all gradually. But prior to taking the second in a series of eight steps, I'd like to talk a little about things that the student can do to enrich his or her creative environment and schedule. Without getting too California touchie-feelie, it's important that the student embrace this process completely. I am reminded of a Schopenhauer quote, "Writing is thinking and thinking demands silence." This is, of course, an ideal that sometimes is impossible, but it seems like a good thing for which to strive. Two things that I find absolutely necessary with regard to the goal of writing are A SACRED SPACE and A SCARED TIME.

**(D)****A SACRED SPACE**

Get yourself an office. If you don't have it all ready, hew out from the granite of your living space, a small section that you can call your own. It is so important. The details matter little compared to the need for it to be a living environment into which you can disappear. A place that's yours; where you can work without fear of being read (if you do not want to be read); a place where you can jump around, playing air guitar, without fear of being seen (if you do not want to be seen); a place where you can fart, pick your nose and talk in different voices, without fear of being told to stop.

It is my considered opinion that it should be a place that you're proud of and one where you keep your stuff (meaning reference books, office supplies, files, etc...). Not to legislate my obsessive-compulsive routines onto anybody else, but I like to subtly and constantly keep

upgrading the space in terms of both decorator improvements as well as technological improvements—comfortable, organized (in your style, whatever that might be) and far from the maddening crowd.

(E)

## A SACRED TIME

A lot of times when I have questions about the creative process, I look to a higher form of artistic endeavor, in my opinion, I look to music. And in my limited research there seems to be two extremes, Igor Stravinsky and George Frideric Handel.

Everyday for six hours a day, the former would descend his basement steps into his rehearsal room and compose. Everyday, without exception. And in the midst of this massively obsessive-compulsive schedule, he wrote some of the most groundbreaking, revolutionary, atonal, gaseous compositions ever. I mean, “The Rite Of Spring”? Forget about it. With regards to the latter, George Frideric Handel, wrote “The Messiah” in forty straight days, virtually without sleep.

I believe that as writers and artists, we choose some point between these two extremes—either we are the dramatic writer (and do it all at once) or we are the systematic writer and we bang away at it, day after day. I recommend the latter, but I wouldn’t dare insist upon it. It is my feeling and experience that by establishing a dependable routine, you actually set up an on going dialogue with the universe, and events will play out before you and help to solve some of your dramatic problems. It’s true.

I write virtually every morning. I get up at six. I stumble around and make coffee. At 6:30am I read for a half-hour; usually something that has nothing to do with what I’m working on. It’s not research reading, it’s fun or helpful. At the moment, I’m on page 133 of “Rewrites: A Memoir” by Neil Simon. One reason for incorporating a half-hour of reading into my writing routine, is because I’m so poorly read, it seems to be an affective way of systematically addressing that issue; by year’s end, even though I’m the slowest reader you’ll ever meet (dyslexic, don’t you know), I will have read probably about a dozen books. The other, more ethereal reason for taking a half-hour to read something is that it places me in a creative mood. I have no facts to back this up, but one of my former students actually said that the reading part of my routine (and the routine I recommend) was good because it placed the student/writer in an alpha state, which is apparently a good state to be in. All I know is that I like doing it. I like reading before I write. It helps me “get into writing” and I’m less of an idiot at parties.

**(F)****YOUR DAILY DOSE**

Now, it's hard to develop a daily discipline in terms of writing. It requires the student to become a little obsessed about the hypothetical. I recommend that you ease into a daily routine, over the course of three weeks. The first week, just write for fifteen-minutes, and then stop. It's important to establish a time that you will stop. I'm NOT recommending that you write for fifteen-minutes in order to get the juices flowing. What I'm recommending is that you establish a dialogue with your subconscious based on trust. In essence, you're asking your subconscious to come out and play for fifteen minutes, and then stop. Again, you are attempting to establish trust with that part of your brain that creatively figures stuff out.

The following week, WEEK TWO, I recommend that you expand your daily discipline to 25-minutes—the length of time it takes to make and drink a cup of coffee in the morning. You put the water in the machine, and sit down at your kitchen table, crack open your notebook or laptop and concentrate with white heat at the subject at hand... and you stop.

The following week after that, WEEK THREE, I recommend that you attempt to read for a half-hour, usually something that has nothing to do with what you're working on (this isn't research reading), and then write for 45-minutes... and you stop.

If you already have a system that works for you, awesome! Don't change a thing. I'm recommending this three-week attack plan for those students who are frustrated with their output and would like to maybe legislate a little more order over the chaos. Perhaps upon leaving class this afternoon, you might consider going to a small, privately owned bookstore and picking out a book that you've been meaning to read; one that you would be proud to have finished. Buy it and begin to read it, a half-hour a day, prior to writing for 45 minutes. And then, as I keep saying, stop. After a week, if you are "religious" about doing this, pseudo-religious things will start to happen to you, small at first, and then bigger. I promise. The rest of your day will seem like it's conspiring to help you with your project.

**(G)****A BROADER DEFINITION**

In my opinion, writing is many things. The exact process that I use is that I compose things longhand in a notebook. I scratch whole pages out, I write jokes in the margins, I will rewrite something over again, in order that it look neater. It all contributes to the final (or semi-final) product. For me, writing comedy this way works. There's something about the laborious process of handwriting the words out that helps me to think about it more thoroughly. Also, there's something to the noncommittal quality of writing in a notebook. Composing at the

computer seems too official for me. Once I have it in some sort of form that I like, then I will type it into the computer (and in so doing, rewrite it again, probably).

Another thing that I would include under my broad definition of writing is sitting and staring at a blank notebook page. I believe that if you can stay focused for 45- minutes, just staring, your subconscious will realize that you're serious about this writing thing and let up on you.

By not having an open-ended attitude about how long I write, I believe I enhance the quality of what I'm putting down on paper. Because I know that there is an end coming or that there is a break in sight, I write very fast. There is a kind of creative bartering that occurs: "If you do this for me (help me in my effort to be as creative as possible), I'll do this for you (stop working at a pre-determined time, and go play). I'm telling you it works like a charm.

## (H)

### THE LESSON

Your assignment for next week is simple. I'm going to tell it to you and then show you how to do it. I would like each of you to get a hold of a copy of The Chicago Tribune each morning for the next week starting tomorrow and read just the front page. Read the headlines and the stories. Read every word. And based upon that collection of stories, write what we call a TWO-LINER. What is a two-liner, you ask? It's the modern version of what used to be called a one-liner. A two-liner is a joke based upon the news of the day that does not assume the audience has read the paper. It is front-loaded with exposition. The first line is cleverly disguised as a newsflash. It's that time early on in The Tonight Show running order, where Jay Leno used to turn to Kevin Eubanks, and go, "You know, Kevin, I was reading the news today, and I noticed..." He will actually tell the news item, so that the second line can be a joke about said item. How do you search out and discover what is funny, you ask? Why, you look for the irony of a given news situation. What is irony?

**i-ro-ny** (I're-ne) *n., pl. -nies*. **1.** The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning. **2.** Incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs. [*<Gk eironeia, dissembling, feigned ignorance.*]

## (I)

### GENERAL NOTES

For the most part, humor has its genesis in the events of a given day. Something that happened somewhere impacted somebody in such a way that all they could do was laugh. Elvis Costello once said, "I used to be disgusted, now I am amused..." which describes the impulse exactly.

For some, the news is too raw a source of information. They prefer it be distilled through a filter of some kind (time, other people's opinions, staying power of the event itself, etc...); but the events of the day, whether immediately or down the road, are where jokes come from. And I maintain that there is humor in all things. Of course some events—the holocaust, Jonestown, September 11<sup>th</sup>—are tougher assignments than others.

DAMNING WITH FAINT PRAISE, “The Colbert Report” on Comedy Central, is a perfect example of this; a disconcerting, half-hearted endorsement not befitting of a person or event.

MAKING THE TINY EPIC AND THE EPIC TINY, Raising a tiny event (a movie star's break-up, a bad performance, a celebrity slip of the tongue, etc...) to an epic, tragic level requiring the brightest minds and the world's resources to negotiate the end; plus, the reverse, “World end's--we'll see what effect this has on Madonna's tour.”

HISTORIC CONTEXT, saying some event is like another event. This event is like this event--using history to explain a feeling, describe the anger, indicate a fear. Important to front load two-liner with enough exposition so that those readers/viewers not familiar with the event or the attitude can appreciate your reference.

PARODY/SATIRE, Mad Magazine is parody; The Onion is satire.

THE STUPID DETAILS, New York Times, Wednesday, April 24<sup>th</sup> “Pope Offers Apology To Victims of Sex Abuse By Priest, No Clear Signal On Policy For Violators” No clear signal? From an organization that took 500 years to recognize Copernicus...”

WHY SOMETHING IS A SEVEN DEADLY SIN, in politics, it's usually pride. The Seven Deadly Sins are, of course: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth.

NOT SO HIDDEN AGENDA, Tuesday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> “Gates Takes Stand For Microsoft.”

“YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH...” Thursday, April 25<sup>th</sup> Los Angeles Times, “CIA Warns Of Chinese Plans For Cyber-Attacks On U.S.”

RED SKIES IN MORNING, scary news events that portend something horrible on the horizon that the people in charge don't seem to be appropriately worried about: April 26<sup>th</sup>, “Lower Tax Receipts Could Double U.S. Budget Deficit.”

The well-spring for the righteous indignation that fuels the anger (and humor) of our observation, with regards to the news, harkens back to that moment in childhood when we began to suspect that our parents might not be the unselfish, virtuous, all-knowing sources of good that we thought they were. For me, it began with a haircut and ended with Reagan; and by “ended” I mean the enviable peaceful conclusion of, “We just have to agree to disagree.” But that spark, that flash of “What? Are you out of your fucking mind?” comes, I believe, from childhood and

that moment of disconcertion when you begin to suspect that the people in charge know less than you; that they just don't have feet of clay, but minds as well.

(J)

## SPECIFIC NOTES

(Sunday, December 26, 2010)

Allow me to describe the process I use for distilling the raw news of the front page of The Los Angeles Times, on any given day, into useable two-liners. As I've said, I coined the phrase two-liners because of something I realized pretty early on as I have attempted to create and hone news-driven sketch comedy. Most people (at least in Los Angeles) don't read the paper and don't really know (or even care) about what's going on. It is therefore necessary to tell them the event, in the first line; and then point out the irony in the second line, hence the term two-liners.

Here are the headlines and the sub-headlines for Sunday, December 26, 2010 of The Los Angeles Times. It's important to be completely engaged in the process; to read every single word on the front page of the paper. You never know what will spark an idea that could lead to a great two-liner. Of course, you are welcome to read the rest of the article, but it's my feeling the information that's not on the front page, tends to make the "joke" less obvious and more obscure. Not always, but a lot of times.

### SUNDAY, December 26, 2010:

From top to bottom, and from left to right:

*Starting in the upper left-hand corner of the front page of the Los Angeles Times, for Sunday, December 26, 2010, we come to a human-interest story to beat the band. It contains two photos and a gut-wrenching article about an infant born with an oversized, malformed right brain. Here's how it appeared on the front page:*

# A Journey of risk, hope

**An infant's seizures would probably lead to severe disability.  
Severing half his brain could give him a shot at a normal life.**

**Molly Hennessy-Fiske**

**The baby boy lay motionless at the center of the windowless operating room. The room gleamed under fluorescent lights that illuminated the wisps of blond hair lining his scalp.**

**Inside Dylan Catania's skull, nerves were misfiring.**

**The right half of his brain was larger than the left, and malformed. The condition, extremely rare, was causing as many as 100 epileptic seizures a day.**

**To save their son's mind, Dylan's parents had agreed to the unthinkable: an operation to sever half his brain.**

**In operating room seven at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA in Westwood, an anesthesiologist lifted the nearly 3-month-old baby onto a bed of white sheep's wool spread across the stainless steel operating table and placed a mask over his nose and mouth.**

**Within minutes, he was unconscious.**

**Dr. Gary Mathern, a pediatric neurosurgeon, scrubbed in. Under his arm, he carried a well-worn wooden case containing his surgical loupes, or magnifying glasses.**

**A nurse swabbed Dylan's head with an antiseptic and a local anesthetic, then turned him on his side, his pale pink head snug in a black U-shaped [See Journey, A30]**

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*NOTE: Jesus! Could there be a harder article from which to extract humor? There might not be anything here. I'm not saying it's impossible to make a joke out of something as serious as this, but it might take more time and effort than it's worth.*

*To sum up the article in my own words, apparently this little baby was born with an oversized, malformed right brain... without surgery, he would probably suffer so many seizures by the time he was a toddler he would be mentally retarded with an I.Q. below 50... Let's see...*

*FIRST LINE: Today at the Mattel Children's Hospital at UCLA, an infant was born with an oversized, malformed right brain—who, had he gone without surgery, would probably have suffered so many seizures that by the time he became a toddler he'd be mentally retarded.*

*SECOND LINE: So, seeing as all the Hollywood meter reader positions were filled, they went ahead with the operation.*

*EDITED VERSION: Today an infant was born with an oversized, malformed right brain—who, had he gone without surgery, would have been afflicted with so many seizures, he would have become retarded. So, seeing as all the Hollywood meter reader positions have been filled, they decided to operate.*

*To say the least, this is a hard subject from which to attempt a two-liner, but something along the lines of what I've done, might be the way to go. Thank God there are more stories on this front page though, huh? I think the above "Edited Version," can still be edited further, and rewritten in such a way that it resembles more my voice than the antiseptic verbiage of the LA Times. Continuing down the first column we come to:*

# Power is weakening Britain's 'Lib Dems'

Henry Chu  
Reporting from  
Bristol, England

**After a lifetime on the political sidelines, Nick Clegg finally knows what it means to be in government: People hate you.**

**Angry students burn him in effigy. Former supporters say he makes them sick to their stomachs. Famous actors say they're profoundly disillusioned.**

**It's been a head-spinning year from Clegg, the fresh-faced leader whose charm and promise of a new way of doing things took the political world by storm and brought some much-needed zest to a stuffy election campaign last spring.**

**His insurgent Liberal Democrats finished third and got to play kingmaker in [See Britain, A4]**

*NOTE: And here is another tough article, which I'm sorry to say, the subject of which I don't know that much about: Nick Clegg and what's going on in British politics. No matter; I still maintain that one can construct a two-liner based entirely on the information that appears on the front page itself.*

*To sum up in my own words, this British politician, Nick Clegg, is the leader of the Liberal Democrats, and last spring he helped make David Cameron Prime Minister. Apparently since then he's been disappointing British votes left and right (well, mostly left). Not unlike what President Obama's been going through here. His current headache seems to fall under the category of "Watch out, you might get what you're after..." (to quote the Talking Heads' song "Burning Down The House").*

*FIRST LINE: "As leader of the Liberal Democrats in England, Nick Clegg helped to install conservative David Cameron as Prime Minister last spring.*

*SECOND LINE: And for his efforts he is now so reviled that they not only burn him in effigy, but also in Sommerset, Bristol and his home district of Sheffield Hallam.*

*Based on the fact that in the second paragraph of the article, it's mentioned that "angry students burned him in effigy," and based on my vague memory of various British towns, I played with the idea that "effigy," might be mistaken for a English town. Still, not my best work. NOTE TO SELF: Find out more about British politics.*

## THE FUTURE OF READING

# Authors writing off publishers

**Some are shunning the traditional way to get books printed and self-publishing online.**

Alex Pham

**Joe Konrath can't wait for his books to go out of print.**

**When that happens, the 40-year-old crime novelist plans to reclaim the copy-rights from his publisher, Hyperion Books, and self-publish them on Amazon, Apple Inc.'s iBooks and other online outlets. That way he'll be able to collect 70% of the sale price, compared with the 6% to 18% he receives from Hyperion.**

**As for future novels, Konrath plans to self-publish all of them in digital form without having to leave his house in Schaumburg, Illinois.**

**"I doubt I'll ever have another traditional print deal," said the author of "Whiskey Sour," "Bloody Mary" and other titles. I can earn more money on my own.**

**For more than a century, writers have made the fabled pilgrimage to New York, offering their stories to publishing houses and dreaming of bound editions on bookstore shelves. Publishing had the power of the purse and the press. They doled out advances to writers they deemed worthy and paid the cost of printing, binding and delivering books to bookstores. In the world of print, few authors could afford to self-publish.**

**The Internet has changed all that, allowing writers to sell their words directly to readers, bypassing agents and publishers who once were the gatekeepers.**

**It's difficult to gauge just how many authors are dumping their publishing houses to self-publish online, though for now, the overall share remains small. But hardly a month goes by without a well-known writer taking the leap or declaring an intention to do so.**

**In addition to Konrath, bestselling author Seth Godin, science fiction writer Greg Bear and action novelist David Morrell, recently have used Internet tools to put their works online them- [See Authors, A26]**

*NOTE: I'm beginning to think I didn't pick the best day of the week (Sunday) to breakdown the stories on the front page of the LA Times; they all seem to be human interest and/or fluff. So, apparently the Internet is beginning to change the world of publishing in much the same way that*

*it changed the recording and film industry—namely bypassing the greasy glut of middle management sleazy-balls who posed as gatekeepers. Ahhhh...*

*Noel Coward once wrote “Authors who used to know better words, now only use four-letter words when... writing prose,” but these days he could just as easily inserted, “... when emailing their manuscripts directly to Amazon or Apple Inc.’s iBooks... anything goes.”*

*FIRST LINE: “Some authors are having their news works published directly online and bypassing the use of a publishing house altogether.”*

*SECOND LINE: “Based on this revelation the two remaining Beatles have reissued their 1966 hit “Paperback Writer,” as “iPad Prose Cut-and-Paster.”*

# Stimulus for L.A. mostly sits unspent

**Only about 25% of \$630 million in U.S. grants has been used. Staff cuts and complex rules are blamed.**

**Marve Reston**

When the federal stimulus program was launched in early 2009, the city of Los Angeles was in dire straits, facing a shortfall of \$427 million and the possibility of mass layoffs. City officials scrambled at the new source of funds, ultimately netting more than \$630 million in stimulus grants.

But nearly two years later, the city has spent only about a quarter of that money, a rate of spending that trails that of New York, Chicago and several other large California cities. Though the bulk of L.A.’s stimulus money was awarded by last March, the city had completed only eight of its 108 projects by mid-October.

L.A. officials say they have been hampered by a painful irony. As millions of federal stimulus dollars flowed in the door, the city was reeling from cost-cutting measures that lead to the exodus of 2,400 experienced workers through an early retirement program and more than 360 layoffs. On top of that, many city workers, including some who are handling stimulus projects, are forced to be on furlough 16 to 26 days a year.

“We saw the retirement of some of the most competent people in the city’s workforce happen just overnight,” said City Administrative Officer Miguel Santana. “So that’s been the challenge, not just with the stimulus but in everything we do.”

**The effect of the unprecedented reduction of the city's staff, officials said, was compounded by initial confusion about the stimulus program's rules; conflicting [See Stimulus, A34]**

*NOTE: At last! A straight ahead news story on the front page of the LA Times—go figure. I love the fact that this article actually contains the word “irony”: “L.A. officials say they have been hampered by a painful irony.”*

*So, the city was in dire straits and a year ago was uncertain as to whether the federal government would be able to help, so the city forced 2400 experienced employees into early retirement, so that when the money came through, there were fewer people in charge who know how to distribute it.*

*FIRST LINE: “The good news is that the federal government has awarded the city of Los Angeles over \$630 million in grants.*

*SECOND LINE: “The bad news is the people in charge are too busy working on the rewrite of their screenplay to even give a shit.”*

# Supreme Court debates shift left

**With Sotomayor and Kagan, liberal justices are no longer drowned out during arguments.**

DAVID G. SAVAGE  
REPORTING FROM  
WASHINGTON

For most of the last two decades, Supreme Court conservatives led by Justice Antonin Scalia dominated the debates during oral arguments. They greeted advocates for liberal causes with sharp and sometimes caustic questions, putting them on the defensive from the opening minute.

But the tenor of the debate has changed in recent months, now that President Obama's two appointees to the court, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, have joined the fray and reenergized the liberal wing.

Gone are the mismatches where the Scalia wing overshadowed reserved and soft-spoken liberals like now-retired Justice David H. Souter and John Paul Stevens. Instead, the liberals often take the lead and press attorneys defending the states or corporations.

“They're clearly on a roll,” said Washington attorney Lisa S. Blatt, who has argued regularly before the high court. “They are engaged and really active. It just feels like a different place.”

**That dynamic was on display this fall, when a court that leans conservative on cases of crime and punishment heard California's ap- [See Justices, A28]**

*NOTE: So, the recently appointed female Supreme Court Justices—Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan—have both figuratively and literally helped to make one of the last boys' clubs, less of one. Where Antonin Scalia could shame and intimidate David Souter and John Paul Stevens, he's having trouble with the two new ladies.*

*Okay, so what is the irony in this story? That Justice Sotomayor and Justice Kagan are more outspoken than recently retired justices Souter and Stevens? That the vibe is different? We've all heard about the Supreme Court Justices' Locker Room... literally wooden lockers where hang the justices robes, with each of their names emblazoned on the door. Personally I've always believed that whole Bush crowd's had problems with women and having to deal with women. Or, could it be, that under their robes, Sotomayor and Kagan have bigger balls than Souter and Stevens?*

*FIRST LINE: President Obama's recent appointees to the Supreme Court, Justices Sotomayor and Kagan, have apparently re-energized the liberal wing of the Court.*

*SECOND LINE: Just in time for the end of the world.*

*SECOND LINE: When reached for comment, Justice Antonin Scalia said, "I think it's so cute how they talk... so dainty... and they smell purrr-tea."*

*SECOND LINE: And thank God! Up until they arrived, the liberal wing of the Supreme Court was laying right next to Terry Shivo, sharing her life-support machine.*

(K)

## TWO-LINERS BASED ON THE NEWS

From June 22, 2009 until June 24, 2009

(6/22/09) **KEVIN, THE ECONOMY IS SO BAD THAT:***"... The next iPhone is only going to be a phone."**"... KFC has had to cut back from 11 secret herbs and species to just seven."**"... Shark Week on the Discovery Channel is only gonna be Tuesday and Wednesday."**"... They're gonna start selling gas at Tiffany's."**"... Larry King's going to STAY married."**"... I called tech support and talked to an American."**"... Strippers in Vegas are having to make change."**"... Lou Diamond Phillips is now just Lou Phillips."**"... Dora The Explorer has become Dora The Couch Potato."**(6/23/09) "The head of Apple Computers, Steve Jobs, returned to work yesterday after taking a six-month medical leave of absence. Turns out, all they needed to do was shut him down, reboot him and install better anti-viral software."**(6/23/09) "A new study shows that while Asians make up 5% of the US population, they only have 2.7% of the regular roles on television. A spokesperson at NBC said, "It's not that NBC is racist, we just don't need to use as many Asians because they're so efficient and well-organized."**(6/23/09) "Police are searching for a group of robbers targeting beauty shops in Detroit, who have hit at least three stores in the past week. Authorities have posted descriptions of the thieves, who should be considered armed and fabulous!"**(6/23/09) "Last week, scientists tested how ants gauge distance by putting tiny little stilts, made out of pig whiskers, on a select group. Meanwhile, still no cure for cancer."**(6/22/09) "Despite the Iran government continuing to clamp down on all Internet technologies, it's still a mystery as to how (and who) exactly is continuing to text, Facebook or tweet this last wave of messages. Can we run that clip?" (CUT TO: VIDEO STOCK FOOTAGE: An Islamic mosque with one of those guys calling the fateful to pray. CUT TO: Close-up as the guy sings and texts.)**(6/22/09) "Did you see that former Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca has some advice for the other car companies? Do we have that clip?" (CUT TO: A clip from the Disney-Pixar animated film "Cars" where the old tow truck, Mater, talks to the other cars.)**(6/24/09) "Our old friend Kim Jong Il is back in the news—he's just made his youngest son the head of their spy agency, but in order to sweeten the deal, he had to give the other senior spy officials a new car. Apparently the initial offering of a Honey Baked Ham didn't cut it.. It is an interesting idea though, giving a way a couple of cars to get what you want..."*

## (L)

## RECOMMENDED READING

1. **“The Lives Of The Great Composers” by Harold C. Schonberg**  
NORTON, Starting first with the birth of the opera composer Claudio Monteverdi in 1567 up until the end of World War II (and Arnold Schoenberg) this book offers short biographies of all the great composers, which is useful to we writers as examples of how these great minds thought.
2. **“The Writer’s Journey” by Christopher Vogler**  
MICHAEL WIESE PRODUCTIONS, Distills the works of Joseph Campbell into a usable form for storytellers in general and screenwriters in specific. Better to go back to the source, “Hero Of A Thousand Faces” and “The Power Of Myth” both by Joseph Campbell.
3. **“American Screenwriters” by Karl Schanzer & Thomas Lee Wright**  
AVON, Interviews sixteen very different screenwriters—how they work and how they made it. Interviews include: Shane Black, Ron Bass, James Cameron, Callie Khouri, John Singleton and more.
4. **“Adventures In The Screen Trade” by William Goldman**  
WARNER BOOKS, One of Hollywood’s most knowledgeable and prolific screenwriters talks about his career and takes you through the writing of his screenplay “Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid.
5. **“Aristotle’s Poetics” by Aristotle**  
NORTON, An oldie (even ancient) but a goodie. Still the best book on exactly what goes into a good story. Even though it’s incomplete (79 pages) it’s still awesome.
6. **“The Art of Dramatic Writing” by Lajos Egri**  
TOUCHSTONE, SIMON AND SCHUSTER, The best book I’ve ever read with regards to the elements of character and what goes into making a good character—whether in a sketch, sitcom, film script or a play.
7. **“Screenwriting 434” by Lew Hunter**  
PERIGEE, The industry’s premier teacher reveals the secrets of the successful screenplay. His technique is just very, very practical. He starts you off by making you write a two-minute description, and then a list of 40 beats, making screenwriting infinitely manageable and unmysterious.

**(M)**

**YOUR ASSIGNMENT:**

Write at least one two-liner per day, starting with Friday, September 13th and ending with Wednesday, September 18th, based entirely from information gleaned from the front page (and the front page only) of the Chicago Tribune: <http://www.chicagotribune.com>.

(N)

**COMEDY JOKE AND SKETCH WRITING**

BASIC INFORMATION

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

MOBILE: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

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