

## **Foreword by Berthold Gunster**

### **Making heavy things heavy is easy**

What is humour? Why would you use humour as a speaker? And is it necessary to use humour every time? Isn't it much better not to try to 'make them laugh' when you have a serious story and 'just' tell your story? Isn't reality sometimes too painful to make fun of? Malinca Verwiel answers these and many more questions in her own wilful and convincing manner, based on her decades of experience with speakers and (standup) comedians.

One thing she is sure of. In her vision (and I would like to agree with her) humour is a natural and inevitable part of human existence. Humour is like breathing. It is automatic.

We all can do it and we all do it. But the question is: is it possible to become better at it. And how can we learn this? If you want to get an answer to these questions then read on after the introduction.

I will guarantee that you will not only get good answers, but you will also be given the tools to actually do something with them.

There is one thought I would like to share with you as the inventor of Flip Thinking. In my opinion comedy is without a doubt superior to tragedy. Why? Because tragedy only contains sadness, while comedy contains both sadness and humour. In exactly the right proportions.

Allow me to explain.

Most people look down on humour. They think it is easy. 'Just making a joke.' 'Very superficial.' But these phrases are usually spoken by people who have no idea what real humour is and (completely) lack the feeling for it. Real humour, which maintains the pain, frustration, and tragedy of life, is the most difficult thing there is. And not many people can do it. But doing the opposite is infinitely easier. It is like the Belgian absurd comedian and cartoonist Kamagurka has said: "Bad artists make heavy things heavy."

Making heavy things light is so much more difficult (which is exactly what Flip Thinking sets out to do). This requires a wide range of skills. Empathy, integrity, intelligence, and creativity to name just a few. Not easy to learn. But certainly not impossible.

The tools that Malinca presents offer a welcome foothold. And one thing is for certain. Humour is a serious matter. Malinca also makes a passionate plea for sincerity and authenticity. She encourages the reader to be an original thinker as a human being, and to make a social impact as a speaker. But then with humour.

Enjoy reading! And (especially) enjoy applying the lessons.

Berthold Gunster, founder of Flip Thinking

## **Introduction**

### **This book is so funny, it will make you cry**

People want to be entertained. With talent shows, quizzes, series, and films on television, and in real life by theatre, music, and football. With 'bread and circuses'. The American presenter and author Ken Jennings tells in his book *Planet Funny* (2018) how the world has 'entertainised'. For thousands of years the future belonged to the strong. During the Industrial Revolution corporate efficiency was the key and after this we put our faith in scientific visionaries. Nowadays, the most desired quality in a person isn't strength or productivity or even innovation, but being funny. Yes, being funny. The media are filled with wordplay and puns, airline companies spend million dollar budgets on safety instruction films with jokes and dance routines, many of us get our news from comedy shows, and a comedic figure can even be elected as the President of the United States of America.

Humour writing and performing is growing in popularity. There simply aren't enough qualified writers to fulfil the rising demand.

But you usually don't become more funny by reading books about humour. This book is the exception. This book doesn't address setups and punchlines, but it approaches humour in a more emotional and personal way. It is my aim to help you as a speaker with a mission to tell your story with humour. Because the world needs this.

I will tell you what I have learned and created in the last 35 years. I will share my golden humour tools for speeches and TEDtalks which have been proven to have a direct effect on the audience. These are universal theatre laws that will work for every speaker, for every topic, and for every audience. I have listed the tools for you with the maximum response from your audience. In order to seduce you to seriously consider using humour in a text or presentation, particularly on a serious topic.

After reading this book, you will think differently about humour, about talent, about performing, and you will have an irresistible urge to start writing and jump

onto the stage. In this book, the audience is the most important, not the speaker. This is not a book filled with presentation tips, this is a book with a vision, and with a kick in the ass to show courage. To address the things that are unspeakable and show leadership.

While writing this book there are wars going on in Ukraine and Gaza. I am deeply touched by these wars. I doubted if this was the right moment for this book. To be allowed to write this feels like a privilege compared to the harrowing suffering of others. But humour is one of the pillars of democracy. With the freedom of speech that we have, I want to motivate you to break the silence and speak the unspeakable.

When people ask me what I do, I always have a lot to explain. They wonder how I came up with the idea to start giving humour trainings. And how I came up with the idea to establish the School for Humour and Authenticity. I didn't come up with it all, it sort of happened to me. I think that the best ideas aren't imagined, they just happen. Just like how reality can be hilarious. Even if you thought of all the possible scenarios, how it eventually turned out in reality didn't occur to you. My career developed from music theatre to cabaret, and from corporate cabaret to humour and standup comedy.

The common denominator had always been humour. And the common denominator had always been the urge to teach others. Another recurring driving force has been talent development.

The reason why I am involved with humour is because I was the youngest child in a drama-filled family. A lot of grief. There were a lot of egos and a lot of fights and the tension was often palpable. It felt like I was the only spectator of a badly written Greek drama or B-movie, performed by mediocre actors. And I kept applauding everybody because everyone longed for tons of appreciation and recognition. But I never felt that I was a part of this, I was always an outsider. This gave me an incredible appetite for lightness, happiness, and air. As well as positivity and beauty. I dived into my own dream world. In my mind I was an acrobat in the circus, sang songs while I walked to school, and taught myself how to play the piano.

At age 21, I was accepted to the Arts University. I got an education to become a drama teacher. And in order to master this subject we were making theatre from early in the morning until late at night. Seven days a week, even on the weekends, we could enter the school day and night. There always was an empty classroom with a parquet floor and a piano in this old building. I would sing all through the night and play piano with my partner in crime. I loved the education and immersed myself completely. I played comic characters, came up with crazy things, wrote my own material, jokes, silly songs, and everybody thought I was funny and I made everybody laugh. I had never noticed that people thought I was funny before so I fully enjoyed this and thought I was on the right path. Until I received a private warning from the teacher of the craft Elementary Theatre, with his moustache and an artistic smell of alcohol: "Malinca, if you continue like this, you will not progress to the second year." I didn't understand what I was doing wrong.

Then I started to observe and imitate the other students. I saw that they were acting more important, more dramatic, and more grotesque. I decided to act 'an actress'. Successfully, because I was allowed to move on to the second year.

But this was the issue: the theatre school taught art with a capital A, and at that time, in the 1980s, people were looking down upon comedy, cabaret, and the newly emerging field of standup comedy.

But making drama is easier than making comedy. It is easy to be serious, we can all make drama. I graduated cum laude with the thesis entitled: *How To Turn A Comedy Into A Tragedy and How To Turn A Tragedy Into A Comedy?*

Humour is being underestimated.

A laugh and a tear.

That is my work.

I hope that this book will make you fall in love with the laugh as well as the tear. In your speech, your presentation, your TEDtalk, or whichever other opportunity. Because I want that your mission is being heard and seen and leaves an unforgettable impression. Making an impact with humour, that is what you will do. Yes, you.

## **PART 1 ON HUMOUR**

Before we can discuss humour we need to clear some things up. In this first part, I will try to give you a different perspective on humour. That when there is humour, there is also always pain. And I want you to think critically on what a joke really is. Sometimes there is no joke at all, but just an insult. Which is a shame, because there are so many other ways to use humour. Instead of abusing it.

## **1. It is a true privilege to speak**

“If I am to speak ten minutes, I need a week for preparation; if fifteen minutes, three days; if half an hour, two days; if an hour, I am ready now.” — Woodrow Wilson, 28th President of the USA

We can all talk. We can all fill our time with chatter too. But how to make your point within ten minutes? Or how to make an indelible impression in ten minutes? Approach your speech like a movie trailer with — obviously — a cliffhanger at the end.

Speaking should be like breathing. Speaking should be a daily routine. Every day at work you should be listening to someone for ten minutes. Every day someone should have the opportunity to proclaim their ideas, their solutions, ask their questions, or get something off their chest for ten minutes. Speaking is actually the most beautiful thing there is. Having a whole audience listening attentively to you. But speaking is also the #1 mortal fear. While we should perceive it as one big birthday present, a gift, a submersion in attention, curiosity, and interest to learn. In my training I often say to the participants: “Envision the audience as a room full of toddlers. They are open to being taken along by you, to be surprised, to be amazed, to engage, to guess, to scream, and to shout. It is nothing more and nothing less than that.”

And what do we do? We give extremely boring and dull lectures in which we hide behind our so-called professionalism. Speaking is an absolute privilege, especially in this age of the digital poverty of X and WhatsApp messages. A live audience sees your intention and hears your intonation, making your text or message more clear and less open to interpretation. There is no one who will interrupt you or who forces you to put your message into a soundbite.

And that message could be anything, big or small. Whether it's embracing forgiveness, like Nelson Mandela preached, the struggle for equality, like Malala Yousafzai, keeping a positive mindset, like Winston Churchill, adapting to change,

like Cleopatra, the need to continue to innovate, like Elon Musk, a peptalk on hygiene in the food industry, a tirade for good copy in marketing, a guideline to deal with your emotions after the death of your parents-in-law in a terrorist attack, a plea to keep things simple, or a failed attempt to quit your job because your boss is simply just too nice, every topic is worthwhile. And perhaps surprisingly, you can approach every topic with humour. Every topic? Yes, every topic.



## PART 2 HUMOUR TOOLS

I make a distinction between ‘stage humour’, ‘interaction humour’, and ‘writing humour’.

- *Stage humour* is for a room full of people and more directed towards the eye. On the visual aspect. Stage humour is written and thought out, it has had a try-out, it has been edited, in a process that sometimes takes years.
- *Interaction humour* is about your daily communication with others and is more spontaneous, relational, and emotional.
- And *writing humour* is for a reader and is often more rational, wordy, and picturesque.

In this book I talk about stage humour.

Most people think in psychological developments and stories. Like in a movie. The main character has a problem and you follow his struggles to overcome this problem in which he will or will not succeed. Then you'll get a happy end, a sad end, or an open end. Just like in our own lives.

Comedians think more in concepts. Like making a statement, playing with expectations, funny lists, and so on. A joke is a concept in itself. The humour tools I describe in this part of the book are a few of those concepts. There are well over fifty humour tools and variations, and new concepts are added all the time. Styles of humour change with each generation. Creating and thinking up new ideas is the foundation of humour and that is why humour is constantly evolving.

Because you don't have to become a comedian but do want to use humour, I have made a selection of sixteen accessible tools with the most effect on the audience. Tools you can apply on every topic. That fit with every style or personality. And that will work for every audience. They are universal. For each topic, speaker, and audience.

Most people already use tools like relativisation, exaggeration, understatement, and overstatement as humour. This is a quick reminder of what they contain:

Relativisation, the advantage of something bad: "The benefit of constipation is a clean anus."

Relativisation, things could always be worse: When things aren't going well at work, you can always comfort yourself by relativising that it could have been a lot worse and that you should be happy that you are not a bowel doctor, or that your job is mowing the verges of a highway.

Exaggeration, augmenting: "I wear glasses, but my neighbour has had her while car windshield ground down to -3. She's so rich! By the way, she has two cars, one to see things from afar, and one for things close by."

Understatement, minimising: "The Germans were not that welcome in 1940."

Overstatement, enlarging: "If there is a 50 percent chance that something goes well, then there is a 90 percent chance that something goes wrong."

The sixteen tools or concepts that I have selected for this part of the book should support your topic, your message, your purpose. These could be:

- Transforming the economy.
- Being a fighter for no-bullshit marketing.
- Innovating the education system.
- Reducing bureaucracy for general practitioners.
- Learning how to deal with grief.
- Recognition for the exhausting work as a care parent.
- Breaking the taboo of being a donor child.
- Taking a vulnerable stance in the legal world.
- Drawing attention to the fact that social media are the cause for low self-esteem.
- Freeing the business world from its corporate hypnosis.

How do you use these humour tools?

First you decide what you want to write about, what your topic is and what your mission is. Then you can use the tools in two ways. The first way is to go through all the tools one by one based on your topic and try to apply them. You see which one you think works best and you build your whole speech around it. You can combine the humour tools and you can never use too many of them. I would definitely recommend you to use one tool each minute of your speech. The three tools I mentioned at the end of part 1 that are indispensable and you really should try are the *act out* (chapter 11), the *visual surprise* (chapter 12), and the *clap trap* (chapter 14).

You can apply these tools everywhere in your text. With the exception of the *impact opening* (chapter 1) and the *first impression* (chapter 2) that should come at the beginning of your text or at least in the first few minutes. Regard the tools as ingredients you can cook with. But it is up to you to think up the recipe.

The second way to use the humour tools is when you have already finished writing your speech. Afterwards you see which part of the text can be transformed into a

tool. Ask yourself: “Do I have an *impact opening* or is the opening still rather mild? Do I use a *metaphor* or could the *metaphor* I am using be stronger? Is there a *hook* in my text, and if not, can I change something into a riddle or puzzle? Does my ending have a *genius idea* or do I need to think things through?” Don’t be complacent with mediocrity.

Don’t stop thinking until you have a eureka feeling and are literally jumping off the couch with enthusiasm. Then your audience will do the same. Most speeches about serious topics are often boring, because they are written too rational, too abstract, too generic, too scenic, too elaborate, too moralistic, or too theoretical. The humour tools force you to look at your topic with lightness and creativity. The tools are light, funny, and humoristic from themselves. It is a fallacy when you think that you should also come up with funny tools. You don’t have to. The tools are doing the work for you. Moreover, if you force yourself to be funny, it doesn’t work. That will lock your creativity completely. And you will come to nothing. Or only something that’s forced, something that’s ‘too constructed’. So let the tools do their job, which will only go better if you don’t enforce the need to be funny too.

## 11 Act out

The American actor and comedian Chris Rock talks about his divorce and makes the comparison between a lawyer and an assassin.

*“So after this child custody shit the money has to be divided, which is really scary. And who makes the most money has to pay the legal bill. So I had to pay a lawyer to divorce from me. That is like hiring an assassin to have yourself killed.”*

*Act out: “This is a picture of me. I am sitting at the Burger King. At 10.38am, okay? Shoot me through the head and then call me.”*

In the world of authors ‘show, don’t tell’ is one of the most common pieces of advice for writers. Instead of writing ‘Alex is mad’, you describe what that looks like. You don’t tell it, you show it. By having Alex talk to his girlfriend, having him insult someone else, or having him yelling all the time. Or you show his actions: clenching his fist, making a rude gesture, slamming the door, or threatening with a weapon. An *act out* is another way of ‘show, don’t tell’, but played instead of written. To simplify, it is a piece of text that has to be acted. You don’t tell about it, you do it. You are acting out a story. With the example of Chris Rock, the *act out* suddenly brings us into a dangerous atmosphere; we are suddenly in the middle of a detective series.

How do you do an *act out*?

You demonstrate something or you imitate a voice. More nicely put: you don’t tell the story, but you become the story. You let people, characters, animals, and objects speak out loud in your mind in the present tense. You speak like you are someone (or something) else. You actually should act out every person that plays a role in your story.

Because you immediately add atmosphere and emotions, an act out can work magical. The audience will respond instantly. Because it no longer is just storytelling but a play, the audience can identify with the situation and become a part of the situation. It is a miniature ‘what if’ scenario that sucks the audience in.

It has the exact same effect as when you suddenly act like a tiger in front of a child. If you would just tell the story, the audience will remain quiet, but if you act out the same text, all sorts of things will happen to the audience. For example:

As a story: *"Then my father started to shout with every goal I missed."*

As an act out: *"My father started shouting with every goal I missed. 'What are you doing, you idiot?' I thought, are you going to be screaming with every goal? What is wrong with you?"*

In the example you might be embarrassed by your father. Because you don't tell your audience that you are ashamed of him, but when you show how your father acted, the audience will identify with you in that moment. The audience feels the shame, without you mentioning shame as an emotion. The audience will automatically sympathise.

Examples of sentences that could have an act out:

*"My mother is very critical about my weight. Even if I would win a Nobel Peace Prize, she is able to say ..."*

*"Politicians lie. If they say: 'I will create new jobs and lower taxes', they are actually saying ..."*

*"Yesterday I had such a stomach ache. It was as if my stomach was telling me ..."*

In the next legendary video you see Jim Jefferies in his act *Gun Control*. Jim Jefferies is an Australian living in America. What he shows on stage is courageous, very courageous. He tells a room full of Americans why their arguments to hold on to their gun laws despite all the bloodbaths, make no sense at all. Besides that this text of 7.47 minutes has at least fifteen act outs, it is a historical clip and definitely a must-see.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rR9IaXH1M0>

And finally an example of a speech for lobbyists on sustainability and the growing demand for home batteries.

As a story: "Cobalt is an important material for batteries in mobile phones and electric cars for instance. In the cobalt mines in Congo they use child labour to dig

up these minerals by hand, releasing toxic substances. The children have luminous light blue hands because of this.

As an act out: “In the cobalt mines in Congo they use child labour to dig up these minerals by hand. When they go home after work, they say: ‘Look mommie, I have blue hands!’”

## **Wrap-up**

**Tool:** Act out.

**What:** The *act out* tool is a fragment of text that is played out. You are acting out a story. You demonstrate it or you imitate a voice. You let people, characters, animals, and objects speak out loud in your mind in the present tense.

**Effect on your audience:** An *act out* is as magical as a *clap trap* (chapter 14). The audience responds immediately. Because it no longer is just a story, but a play, the audience will identify with you and become a part of it.

**Goal for you as a speaker:** You want the audience to identify, you want to drag them into the experience.

**Advice:** Everything in your text that can be acted out, should be done as an *act out*. Your text can’t have too many comparisons, can’t have too many lists, and the same goes for an *act out*.

### **PART 3 ON AUTHENTICITY**

One of the misconceptions about humour is that it only takes a good joke to reach your goal. But the person delivering the joke is more important than the joke itself. The person who is telling the joke, the way they tell it, the subtext you present the joke with. Humour is about being real, about authenticity. But more importantly, if you have the courage to be authentic, you are walking the thin line between being adapted and being unadapted and that is where the tension is and where you can find a world of jokes.

In this last part of the book I will show why authenticity is beautiful, important, exciting, adventurous, and wildly interesting. I will introduce a new method for public speaking, enabling us to stop presenting like robots. If you have the courage to do this, you will distinguish yourself hugely and you will make a big impact. Promised.



## **1 Focus on what's real and not on what's funny**

"Learning to be a comedian is learning to be you."

Jerry Seinfeld, American actor, writer, and standup comedian

Someone who tries to act like a professional singer, can make your toes curl. Someone who forcedly pretends not to appear frustrated will make your heart burn. Someone who is making himself look big and constantly has the need to prove himself is exhausting to watch. When someone isn't authentic, it can be extremely painful. "Be real", was the message I got when I participated in a comedy course by Keith Palmer of the Comedy School in London. Focus on what's real and not on what's funny. It is about your audience witnessing how you are openly reflecting. No one knows how to be 'completely yourself', but everybody is able to reflect openly and out loud on themselves. Then you show whether you have a realistic and honest idea about yourself. The funny thing is that once you really embrace this principle, you can never go wrong on stage, because every moment, every line, every interaction with the audience can become material. That *everything* can become material, that everything can be used.

If you go on stage with the idea "I will blow them away", whether you are able to do so, the crowd's reaction will probably be that they will think you are arrogant. When you stand on stage and are shitting your pants, but try to hide it, you will fail miserably. Your audience will see through you in a second. The audience will sense everything. The stage has no mercy. It is merciless for people with a wrong perception of themselves. But by being as real as possible, your listeners will reward you with a lot of respect and appreciation. But by being real, I definitely don't mean weak. I mean honest, vulnerable, and strong. We want to have an honest story, but not pathetic or weak. On stage you have to 'give' something and not just 'get' something. This is not a circle of an AA-meeting. Authenticity is accepting yourself for who you are and showing what's happening inside of you, instead of trying to be someone you're not. So show your human complexity, your

experiences, ideas, different layers, and contradictions. It is exactly this complexity that makes a person or thought interesting.

The details, the illogic, and the paradoxes makes us human beings irresistibly entertaining. In that sense, authenticity is a continuous self-examination. An infinite research. A never-ending galaxy. You can always become more authentic. With your openness you can show others that they can also share more of themselves. Your doubts, fears, and the twists of your mind. Your nonsense, digressions, observations, emotions, failures. You are only human. Embracing your imperfection yields a ton of material for the stage, but also for your off-stage activities. If we are able to take ourselves, and life, a little less seriously, we all become a little liberated, we would have more interesting conversations with each other, and so much more fun.

Authenticity is close to the joke, because it deals with honesty and sincerity. The truth sometimes hurts. And that is where the poignant lies, the taboo, or the boundary. Just like humour, authenticity will push the boundaries.

Why are dogs often so funny? Because they are real. Why are people who are acting funny not funny at all? Because it isn't real. You will become more funny if you become more authentic. Isn't that funny? That being funny is related to authenticity? I have to laugh at crying babies because they are so real. I have to cry over joyful people because I am afraid that their jolliness is fake. Or forced.

I recently read this sentence: "Don't look for what is funny, but look for what is real." With this sentence as an example: "I am sorry I am late, but I did not want to come." Wow, that takes some deep digging! To what is real ... and to have the courage to address it. First to dig so deep and then to have the guts to speak it out loud. The courage to be unadapted. Not socially accepted, not politically correct, not keeping the peace, not afraid. Not having to fit in, but daring to stand alone. Not for the sake of being alone, but because you strive for a higher goal. Justice, honesty, passion, faith, motivation, connectedness, love, wisdom. Authenticity is to strive for a higher goal. People with humour are heroes.