

## So You Wanna Be a Comedian?

### Some Tips to Make You Look More Professional Your First Time on Stage.

*By Paul Giles © 2000*

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**Editor's note:** Besides being a former Holy City Zoo comedy club regular, Paul Giles has over 20 years experience in stand-up comedy and humor, and has written freelance for dozens of comedians, including "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno and "Politically Incorrect" with Bill Maher, as well as staff writing positions in television and radio. Giles can be contacted at [comedywritingpros.com](http://comedywritingpros.com). He is available as freelance writer. And author of Jokes Study Series I .

Everybody has to have a "first time," whether it's sex or comedy. The only difference is that with comedy you hope you get more laughs. Since I was so scared my first time in both arenas that I don't remember much about either, I'd have to say I got more laughs for the sex thing. Of course I wasn't naked in front of that first audience, so it's hard to know whether I could have gotten the same big yucks if I had performed in the buff that I got from the girl. But I digress . . .

If you're lucky enough to live in a city with an established comedy club which has a regular open mike (a rare thing these days), then you're on your way to finding out if you have what it takes to be a comedian. A few towns even have an experienced instructor who will coach you through the process. John Cantu's classes in San Francisco are among the best. But what if you're forced to go it alone, without the benefit of someone like John who's been around clubs and comedians for decades and who's willing to help get you through your first set on stage?

An audience knows a rookie immediately, and doesn't give a novice the same respect they'd give to a veteran. Looking like you know what you're doing on stage goes a long way toward having a good set your first time up. To do that, here are a few things to remember that may help you get through this rite of passage without too much trauma.

*First, try not to look scared.* I know the number one fear Americans have is speaking in front of people. (Number two is death. Go figure. I'll take the speaking over the death thing anytime.) Still, there's nothing I can say that will make it easier for you to get up on stage without being afraid. One night a few years ago I went to The Comix Café in Buffalo, a club where I was a regular performer, to see Frank Gorshin. (Although a great comic/impressionist, he's best known as The Riddler from TV's Batman show.)

After he finished a killer hour on stage, I introduced myself and questioned him about his first time on the Ed Sullivan Show. I asked, "Frank, it was your first national exposure, and there you were on the world's greatest talent showcase, a young guy of 20 about to debut in front of tens of millions of people. What was going through your mind?" With no hesitation he said, "The same thing that was going through my mind an hour ago before I walked up on this stage tonight. I was scared out of my mind." Thirty years of performing, working a small club in Buffalo in front of only 200 people and he was scared.

Like I said, there's nothing I can say to ease the fear, but try to look calm, speak with confidence , and don't stutter or trip over your lines. You'll get the audience to at least pay attention.

But how do you speak with confidence? That's related to my second tip. Know your material. Memorize and practice every word so you can do your set in your sleep, forward and

backward. I've seen lots of comics, not just first-timers, walk up on stage with notes printed on napkins that they stop to look at between jokes.

Why should the audience give its undivided attention to someone who doesn't respect them enough to know his/her material? Then there are all the little distractions that can throw you off completely if you're not confident in your material. A waiter drops a glass, a heckler shouts something, or a big group comes in and tries to find a place to sit while you're in the middle of your set. If you don't know your material you may get totally lost, forgetting what's next. Knowing your material can get you through anything that happens.

My first time was at The Other Café in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. I was told to prepare five minutes of my best material (like I had five minutes of anything resembling "best"). But that night, when I got there, I was told that there were so many open mike comics plus a few veterans who had shown up to do guest sets, that I'd only have three minutes. Sure I had memorized my act, but not as well as I should have. Editing on the fly was impossible for such a novice, and skipping those little bits that would take me over three minutes got me lost. I didn't really "know" my material.

While I honestly don't remember much about what happened that night (I guess our minds automatically block out painful experiences - the audience blocked ME out completely), I can tell you what was the most disconcerting moment from my first time. After my introduction, I walked on stage and was completely disoriented because I didn't I wouldn't be able to see the audience. The spotlights were so bright it felt like I was talking to an empty room, and from the lack of laughter I might as well have been. So if you're about to perform for the first time, scope out the audience just before hitting the stage. Chances are the room won't be full, and there'll be scattered groups of people sitting out there in the dark. Try not to squint at the lights (again, it looks unprofessional), and pretend you're making eye contact with the audience members whose positions you've memorized.

And speaking of lights, here's a mistake I've seen even regular open-mikers make: not staying in the center of the stage. That big bright spotlight is there to shine on you so the audience can see you work. All too often the comics see that glaring spotlight as an inconvenience, and many will move out of the light to better see the audience and avoid the eyestrain. They'll take the microphone in hand and leave the stand center stage in the spotlight, as though the mike stand was the show. Either leave the mike in the stand to keep your hands free, or remove the mike and move the stand out of your way, but whatever you do stay in the spotlight center stage.

Another rookie error I see too often is for an open-miker or first-timer to bring a drink on stage. Mistake. When you're learning to do stand up, the most precious thing you have is stage time. It's your life's blood. It's hard to get and is all too short. Some clubs only give you five minutes a month. Five minutes a week is a luxury. Time on stage is your prep school, college, and graduate school combined. If all you have are these minuscule chances to learn, why would you waste precious seconds and stop the flow of your act to take a drink you really don't need? It's only five minutes. When you're middling or headlining, then maybe you'll need something to keep your voice from cracking. For an open mike, forget it. Use the time more wisely.

And that segues into another mistake. Since time is so precious, don't waste it with unnecessary small talk. Out of five minutes, you can waste 30 seconds, or 10% of your time, with, "Hi! How you all doing? Having a good time? Gee, that's great. Yada yada yada." Then

there are the comics who one after another start off with, "Let's hear it for our MC, Don Stevens!" There's another 30 seconds gone while the audience applauds not you but someone else.

And while Don may like the extra recognition, he doesn't need it. He's already gotten his laughs and applause from his warm-up. Forget the MC. Just do your act without wasting that 20%. Think of it this way: you go to a lawyer, who charges you \$150 for an hour of advice, but for the first twelve minutes he asks how you and the family are, how you like your new car, and where you get your hair cut. You'd feel ripped off. Why rip yourself off by wasting the only thing of value a comedian has? Time!

Now, while I'm no fashion expert, and *there's no "dress code"* for comedians, there are a couple things to remember in the way of clothing. First, don't wear a hat. It shades your face, and any facial expressions which are often key to the laugh won't be seen by the audience. Second, don't wear clothing that is so weird or loud or busy it distracts the audience's attention from you. Third, look at what professional comics wear on stage and on TV and dress similarly. An audience usually only knows what comics look like from TV. As I said earlier, looking professional is half the battle.

I'm not sure whether there are one million other tips to give you, or two million. There are so many little things a new comic should know that a short essay like this couldn't possibly begin to fill in all the blanks. But the few tips I've enumerated here are probably the most important, and if you take at least some of the advice I've presented here, it will go a long way toward making your first experience on stage easier and more productive.

One last thing - for your first time on stage, don't bring your friends. You don't need people who are just being nice, laughing at your jokes and telling you how funny you were. You probably weren't, and since they're your friends they won't tell you if you sucked. With an audience full of strangers you'll get a genuine read on what works and what doesn't.

If you want everyone you know to see your first set, videotape it. That way you can decide later if you want anyone to see it. Besides, in the real world of comedy, your friends don't make up the audiences you'll encounter on the road.

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*"First, try not to look scared"*

**Cantu note:** The number one fear Americans have is speaking in front of people: I am reminded of Jerry Seinfeld's great line: "That means, at a funeral, most of the people attending a funeral would rather be in the coffin than give the eulogy."

*"there's no dress code"*

**Cantu note:** Once you get established and are starting to get booked outside of the open mikes, you will find a wide variety of attire at various events. I tend to follow a tip I got from the late Jim Samuel's. "Cantu, I always try to dress one notch above the audience. If they are going to be in shorts, I'll wear pants and shirt. If they are going to be in slacks and shirt, I'll wear a sports jacket. If they are going to be in sports jackets and tie, I'll wear a suit. . . " And Cantu says, "Good advice. It makes you look more than just someone who simply got up from the crowd and decided to wander on stage. Another quote from Seinfeld, "You dress to go to work."