

Comedic Form

Humor comes in many flavors, any of which may appeal to one person but not to another, and which may be enjoyed in alternation or in combination. Here are names and descriptions of the varieties of comic expression:

1. **Anecdotal:** Named after the word *anecdote* (which stems from the Greek term meaning “unpublished”); refers to comic personal stories that may be true or partly true but embellished.
2. **Blue:** Also called off-color, or risqué (from the French word for “to risk”); relies on impropriety or indecency for comic effect. (The name probably derives from the eighteenth-century use of the word *blue* to refer to morally strict standards — hence the phrase “blue laws” to refer to ordinances restricting certain behavior on the Sabbath). A related type is broad humor, which refers to unrestrained, unsubtle humor often marked by coarse jokes and sexual situations.
3. **Burlesque:** Ridicules by imitating with caricature, or exaggerated characterization. The association with striptease is that in a bygone era, mocking skits and ecdysiastic displays were often on the same playbills in certain venues.
4. **Dark/Gallows/Morbid:** Grim or depressing humor dealing with misfortune and/or death and with a pessimistic outlook.
5. **Deadpan/Dry:** Delivered with an impassive, expressionless, matter-of-fact presentation.
6. **Droll:** From the Dutch word meaning “imp”; utilizes capricious or eccentric humor.
7. **Epigrammatic:** Humor consisting of a witty saying such as “Too many people run out of ideas long before they run out of words.” (Not all epigrams are humorous, however.) Two masters of epigrammatic humor are Benjamin Franklin (as the author of *Poor Richard’s Almanack* and Oscar Wilde.
8. **Farce:** Comedy based on improbable coincidences and with satirical elements, punctuated at times with overwrought, frantic action. (It, like screwball comedy — see below — shares many elements with a comedy of errors.) Movies and plays featuring the Marx Brothers are epitomes of farce. The adjective also refers to incidents or proceedings that seem too ridiculous to be true.
9. **High/highbrow:** Humor pertaining to cultured, sophisticated themes.
10. **Hyperbolic:** Comic presentation marked by extravagant exaggeration and outsized characterization.
11. **Ironic:** Humor involving incongruity and discordance with norms, in which the intended meaning is opposite, or nearly opposite, to the literal meaning. (Not all irony is humorous, however.)
12. **Juvenile/sophomoric:** Humor involving childish themes such as pranks, name-calling, and other immature behavior.
13. **Mordant:** Caustic or biting humor (the word stems from a Latin word meaning “to bite”). Not to be confused with morbid humor (see above).
14. **Parody:** Comic imitation often intended to ridicule an author, an artistic endeavor, or a genre.
15. **Satirical:** Humor that mocks human weaknesses or aspects of society.
16. **Screwball:** Akin to farce in that it deals with unlikely situations and responses to those situations; distinguished, like farcical humor, by exaggerated characterizations and episodes of fast-paced action.
17. **Self-deprecating:** Humor in which performers target themselves and their foibles or misfortunes for comic effect. Stand-up comedian Rodney Dangerfield was a practitioner of self-deprecating humor.
18. **Situational:** Humor arising out of quotidian situations; it is the basis of sitcoms, or situation comedies. Situational comedies employ elements of farce, screwball, slapstick, and other types of humor.
19. **Slapstick:** Comedy in which mock violence and simulated bodily harm are staged for comic effect; also called physical comedy. The name derives from a prop consisting of a stick with an attached piece of wood that slapped loudly against it when one comedian struck another with it, enhancing the effect. The Three Stooges were renowned for their slapstick comedy.
20. **Stand-up:** A form of comedy delivery in which a comic entertains an audience with jokes and humorous stories. A stand-up comedian may employ one or more of the types of humor described here.