

How I Got Started In Stand-up Comedy By [Steve Roye](#)

My First Awful Attempt At Stand-up Comedy

My very first attempt at stand-up comedy was no less than tragic for me.

I was 23 years old and in the Navy on shore duty in Jacksonville, Florida. I wasn't making much money in the Navy at that time — I had only been in a couple of years at that point. So I got a part-time job as a bar back (someone who restocks beer in the coolers) at the Enlisted Club on the base.

It was 1982 and the comedy boom of the 80s was just about to take off. My Navy job required me to conduct many adult education classes on a variety of topics. The content of most of these classes ranged from boring to absolutely coma inducing. So in order to keep people from falling asleep, I started interjecting my own sense of humor into the classes and the topic areas in general. It was not the result of any formal training I had gotten in being funny — it just kind of happened.

Armed with the knowledge that I had the ability to make a classroom of strangers laugh, I began thinking about trying my hand at stand-up comedy. I watched comedians on TV and it looked easy enough. I felt I was probably a natural. So I talked the club manager at the Enlisted Club into giving me 5 minutes of stage time after the magician scheduled to perform that week.

I will never forget what happened next...

I had invited two of my dear friends to the club to watch my premier performance. I was confident and had no reservations about going on stage. The MC gave me an introduction and there I was — instantly, I was a comedian!

But the next few minutes would change my life for the next 10 years and beyond.

There were about 50 people in the audience. When I hit the stage, the first thing I did was fumble with the microphone. I had never held one before and I found it awkward — so much so that my voice faded in and out because I didn't keep it next to my mouth. But I kept talking. I thought that was all there was to it.

I talked for about 3 minutes — probably the longest 3 minutes of my life. The audience stared at me. I heard someone say, "What is he doing up there?" Some of the audience members just broke into conversation with one another.

I said "Goodnight" after about 3 minutes. I fumbled to get the microphone back into the mic stand and got off the stage. By the time I got off stage, I was reduced to little more than some sort of interruption that occurred after the magician.

When I got to the table where my friends were sitting, they didn't say a word. I quickly thanked them for coming. They said, "Better luck next time," and I quickly left the club — feeling more humiliation than I had ever felt in my life.

On the way home I vowed I would never even think about doing stand-up comedy again. The experience had such a negative impact on me and my self-esteem that it took me an entire decade to get over it.

As I continued on with my Navy career, I continued to frequently conduct a very wide variety of training classes. I became a sought-after trainer because I could take the most boring topic and make it fun. I never planned my humor in the classes I gave — it just kind of happened. And I was very content with my success as a trainer and teacher.

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Then, a strange thing started to happen with increasing regularity. I would be in the middle of training a group of people and some of the students would be laughing so hard, I would have to stop and wait for the laughter to die down before I could continue.

This was happening with greater and greater frequency, even though I couldn't even begin to tell you why or how it happened. All I knew was that I was very comfortable in front of a class of strangers and could make them laugh with great consistency. Soon, the idea about becoming a stand-up comedian began to creep back into my head.

All The Stand-up Comedy Books and a Bunch of Jokes Later

The year was 1992 and I was stationed in San Diego, California. Even though my first experience with stand-up had been devastating, something in my heart told me I could do it and do it well. I made the conscious decision to pursue it yet another time.

But this time would be different. I would try to get my hands on every scrap of information I could about stand-up comedy in order to have the best possible chance of success. Well, at least I thought it would be different...

I started looking for books on stand-up comedy. I got my hands on all the books available on stand-up comedy at the time. Taking the guidance from the books, I started writing jokes and preparing an act for the stage.

It was then that I started to make some important discoveries.

Some of the books were hard to read and understand. Some of the books only had the most basic of information. All of the books focused on understanding joke formulas as the basis to write and develop comedy material. Some of the books either stated or implied that it took a long time to be a great comedian. Still, I was committed to becoming a comedian. I set out to get on stage wherever I could, with my "finely crafted" act.

Then, I ran right into the brick wall of reality...

As a newcomer, I found it difficult to get stage time at open mike events. When I did get on stage, I was riddled with stage fright. I would go into my "act" and get some laughs, but I was very dissatisfied with the results. I could get longer and harder laughs in a classroom than I could with my act.

Every comedian I talked to said, "To get good, you need lots of stage time."

But in a 3-month period, I was only able to get on stage **four times total** at the only open mikes available at the time. I figured that at this rate, I would need to wear adult diapers by the time I was able to develop a decent act. **I needed an alternative — some way I could get in front of different audiences frequently and get the stage time I needed without having to fight so hard to get stage time at open mikes.**

I was telling a friend about how difficult it was to get stage time, and he suggested that I teach Comedy Traffic School. I didn't even know what it was, but he explained it to me.

In California, they have a thing called traffic school. Basically, it is 8 hours of driver's training that is made available to people who get traffic tickets. It is a way to keep points off one's driving record, subsequently keeping car insurance rates low.

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But the courses offered were notoriously boring and hated by the community at large. So some companies began to offer Comedy Traffic School as a marketing technique to get people into classes. I checked it out. After minimal training, I was a certified traffic school teacher by July of 1992, soon teaching two to three classes a week in order to get my "stage time."

But it didn't take me long to realize that my "jokes" weren't working.

I remember trying so hard to make the people laugh, but most would not. Some would roll their eyes back into their head at my corny attempts at humor. I even resorted to some material that was really too adult and not really appropriate for a general public class. Some people complained. I knew this wasn't the way it should be.

The Way It Should Be

I realized that while I was trying hard to become a comedian, I had never really been to a real comedy show with real, working comedians.

Since there was an Improv very close to my home, I decided that I should go and check out a show. It was October 1992 and the beginning of some of the most important events that would shape the rest of my comedy career.

I had never heard of any of the comedians performing that night. I was like most people — I only knew of the comedians on TV shows. I didn't realize that there were literally thousands of comedians working "the road" that most folks would rarely recognize outside their stage performance.

The opening act went on stage for 10 minutes. He may have gotten one laugh from the audience for his entire set. He introduced the middle act. The middle act came on stage and got several laughs in the beginning of his 20-minute set, but overall, he just wasn't funny at all.

I was with my wife (now ex-wife) at the time and I remember commenting to her, "Maybe you have to develop a taste for this stuff." But as I watched the crowd around me react to the first two performers, it was easy to see that these comedians were hardly getting any laughs.

The headliner that night was Bill Engvall.

I had never heard of him or seen him anywhere. He hit the stage and after the fastest 45 minutes I had ever experienced, I laughed so hard my face hurt, my sides hurt, and I had tears pouring from my eyes. It was one of the most incredible things I had ever experienced. **I didn't want it to end.**

I left the Improv that night knowing exactly what level of impact I wanted to make with an audience when I got the chance to perform. **I would settle for nothing less.**

Back to Work

I worked even harder to write and rewrite jokes. I read and reread the stand-up comedy books I had. I talked with other open mike comedians, but they could provide little insight.

I was doing everything in my power to improve as quickly as possible. I didn't want to wait for years to get good at stand-up comedy. **I wanted to be good at it now.**

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I remember one traffic school class in particular. It was late in November 1992. The 8-hour classes during the week were split over two nights. Weekend classes were held in one 8-hour session. I started the first 4-hour session of a traffic school class on a Monday night.

By the end of the first night of this class, I was ready to quit the whole idea of being a comedian and just give up. And I really didn't want to come back and face these folks for another 4 hours on Tuesday after a particularly dead, laughless evening like I had just experienced with a group of people who were less than impressed with my comedic talent.

I was driving home, thinking to myself, "**I've done everything possible. I've followed the rules in the books. I understand the joke formulas. Still, I can't get the laughs I want.**"

At that point, it appeared to be hopeless and I would just have to face the cold, hard fact that I just wasn't cut out to be a stand-up comedian.

The Night Everything Changed

As I was getting ready to leave the next evening for the last 4 hours remaining in the class, an odd thing happened. I usually wore slacks and a tie to teach class. (This was the school policy.)

I figured since I was going to quit anyway, I would just wear what I liked to wear. I put on my jeans and polo shirt. I wore my tennis shoes and my favorite ball cap. What were they going to do, fire me? I was quitting anyway.

As I drove to the class, I made the decision to just drop all my "jokes" and have fun like I normally would when I teach a class. At this point, I just didn't care. My dreams of being a stand-up comedian were in the toilet anyway, so I figured, why not just have some fun?

I killed the class that night. They laughed most of the night and I had fun for the first time since I started teaching traffic school. **It was that night that changed my whole outlook and approach to stand-up comedy.**

I realized that the so-called rules and formulas I was studying in the books really didn't work for me.

But when I could truly be myself, I could make people laugh.

It was at this point that I set out to discover exactly why I could make a classroom of people laugh but I would choke on stage when I was trying hard to be a comedian. I was determined to develop my own guidelines and tools by which to play the stand-up comedy game.

Here's What I Know

So make no mistake. When I started this business, I was just like you.

I was hungry for information. I read and studied all the books available on the subject.

I spoke with dozens of comedians.

I took an absolutely horrible course on stand-up comedy. Here's what I discovered:

- Comedy writers (rather than real, working stand-up comedians) write many of the books on stand-up comedy.

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- The material in the books lacked sufficient tools or had an "old school" approach to stand-up comedy.
- It is difficult for most comedians to explain what it is they do or how they really do it. They just know how to entertain an audience from years of doing it. Unlike many comedians, I can tell you exactly how I developed my act. I know what worked for me and what didn't.
- Some of the books I read were confusing. They'd hook you by implying that anyone can be funny, but then they'd contradict themselves by saying the opposite. They'd tell you to be yourself and see things from your perspective, but then they'd try to prompt you to magically develop a label, persona, character, or style — almost as if it were some prerequisite for success.

I ended up on the same path as most every other comedian — fending off the dragons with a paper sword. To me, there is nothing worse than walking around in the dark.

Is The Killer Stand-up Online Course Really Different?

Absolutely. That is one thing of which I am certain.

The only reason the [Killer Stand-up Online Course](#) even exists is because I simply could not make conventional wisdom work for me. I put into practice the teachings from all of those other books, but the laughter just didn't happen for me on stage.

Look, I'm not saying that those books have nothing to offer you.

In terms of writing "jokes" one at a time or learning about all the different types of "characters" that can be done on stage, I don't hold a candle to those books. If that's what you're after, you need to forget about my online course right now and pick up a few of those books. Maybe they'll help you do wonders with your act. If so, more power to you.

All I am saying is that they didn't do a whole lot for me and my students. I sucked at writing jokes one at a time, and I couldn't come up with a character that both the audience and I liked. **And that's why I had to do something else — something that worked for me, something completely different.**

The goal in my online course is to give you the best possible instruction and tools to help you **develop your material based on who you are — not what you think a comedian should be — in the fastest way possible.** Beyond that, the ball is in your court.

Two Things You Need to Know Before You Do Anything

There are a couple of other points I should make before you do anything.

The first thing you need to know is this:

No matter what you do, you need to be having fun.

Your material needs to satisfy two entities — you and your audience. I cherished the freedom to say whatever I want to on stage when I was performing.

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But if an audience wasn't laughing, it wasn't any fun for me. I found that the best situation to be in was when I liked the material I was doing and the audience liked it too.

When your act is no longer fun for both parties, you dry up. Frustration can set in.

That's when stand-up becomes just like any other stupid job, instead of the love of your life.

Look around you. You probably won't have to look far to find some comedians who appear to be dried up. Either they no longer love their act, or the audience doesn't love it, or both. The fun is no longer anywhere to be found.

The addictive nature of this business is directly related to how much fun you have on stage and how much fun your audience has when you are performing.

The second essential thing you need to know before moving on is this:

Successful stand-up comedy takes a lot of hard work (but it can be fun if you know what you are doing).

I hate to burst your bubble, but there is no replacement for hard work. I may have moved up very rapidly in the stand-up comedy food chain, but it didn't just fall into my lap. I got to the point where I did because I worked at it all the time.

But I do believe that **you can work smarter and faster if you have the right approach, the right tools, and the right techniques at your disposal.**

My goal is to give you the tools and techniques you need that will actually work for you if you have real comedy talent and the capacity to understand and apply the information that I provide.

Final Thoughts

When I started my stand-up comedy career, I figured that it would take me 5-7 years to become a decent feature act.

That's because all the books I read said it takes 5-10 years to get good at stand-up comedy.

That didn't happen. I spent 11 years of my 13 active performing years as a headlining comedian. And I owe it all to the information that you have access to now.

That's my story.

All I can do at this point is to encourage you to check out the 5 free lessons in the [Killer Stand-up Online Course](#) and...

I wish you the best of success in your stand-up comedy adventures!

Sincerely,
Steve Roye
[SteveRoye.com](#)