

# The Story Copywriter Podcast

Episode 36:  
Comedy!



## 36: Comedy

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In 2013, I took on a new Google ads consulting project with a client in a B2B market. The client had a potentially lengthy offline sales process. We were driving clicks to a landing page which asked people to register their interest. The client would nurture those leads for a period of time.

I suggested to Brian, the business owner, that while his Google ads were important, they also needed automated marketing follow-up systems in place. They needed emails to nurture the people that we were attracting with the ads.

Brian nodded along; he half agreed with me. But in his opinion, we just need more traffic to the website.

So we started off the project, and for a while things went pretty well. His conversions were up year on year, his cost per conversion was down. We were getting people to opt in from from the landing pages that we were using.

One day I got an email from Brian. "Hi, Rob," it started. "I've been thinking about what you said at the start of the project about email marketing, and I've hired so-and-so to write the emails for

us. He's going to be writing emails to go out from our MailChimp account, to the people who are opting in."

As you might imagine, steam came out of my ears. Internally I thought to myself, "Brian, we've been over this. I *DO* email marketing! I *AM* a copywriter! Why did you go and hire someone else?"

Once I'd calmed down and the red mist had lifted, I replied and said, "Look, Brian, I already do this." And he said, "Well, I didn't realize. I thought you were just a Google AdWords guy..."

Just the Google AdWords guy. Pfft.

So we carried on, and so-and-so was allegedly writing emails for Brian. The weeks ticked by, and still these emails didn't appear. Eventually, finally, I received the first email sent out through MailChimp.

The first line of the email began, "At Brian's company, we believe..."

If you've been following my work for any length of time, you'll know that if you start off an email by saying, "at my company, we believe," then you burn in an email marketing hell. That is not a great way to open a marketing email.

I fed this back to Brian. I said, "Brian, look. You've hired this alleged copywriting expert, and they're writing emails in cliches. They're not drawing on any of your main benefits. They're not telling your story." He grumbled about this. He didn't really want to hear it.

Eventually, a few months later, we met up in person. I went to Brian's offices and he finally said, "Look, Rob. How much would it cost for you to rewrite the email sequence?"

Over the next few months I interviewed Brian. We explored his story. Like many of my copywriting clients, he started off by saying, "I don't really have anything interesting to say. All my stories are boring." But once I started asking questions about Brian and his business, it was like the dam had burst! A raft of interesting and unexpected stories emerged from the interviews.

We started telling these stories in his marketing. So not only were we generating leads through Google Ads, but we then also nurtured these leads with true, authentic emails that told his real story.

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Today's episode at the Story Copywriter Podcast is all about the comedy plot, which is plot five of Christopher Booker's *Seven Basic Plots*. The comedy plot, I think, is a little different from some of the plots we've looked at previously. If you think back to Rags to Riches or Overcoming the Monster, the intro story to those podcast episodes was much longer. It was me versus a dark character, engaged in an epic duel.

In a comedy plot, the dark energy in the story is centered around **confusion**. Confusion over identities, confusion over roles. Because of that, a comedy plot can be long. Effectively *War and Peace*, one of the most epic stories ever written, is a comedy plot. It might not seem it because there's a lot of war, trauma and death, but structurally it's a comedy plot. So a comedy plot can be very long, but it can also be very short.

You could use a comedy plot more as an anecdotal story to illustrate something. The story I've just told you about Brian is probably one that I would use as a supportive story. It isn't the key story that I'm going to place at the heart of my marketing. It's a supporting story that I'm going to send out *after* one of the other plots.

So we're going to explore all of this in detail in this episode. As always we'll cover three ideas, and the three ideas are identity, the nightmarish tangle, and egocentricity. So let's jump into the first idea...

## 1. Identity

Every comedy plot is centered around a confusion over identity. In many of Jane Austen's novels for instance, there will often be confusion about who the protagonist's true love really is. It takes Elizabeth Bennett quite a long time to realize that Mr. Darcy actually isn't a scumbag, and might be her true love after all.

*Pride and Prejudice* is a good example because it illustrates that in a comedy plot, one of the main characters always acts in an egocentric way. It's this egocentricity where the confusion over identity comes from.

It could be the hero that is acting in an egocentric way; it could be one of the other characters. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett is the heroine of the story and it's her egocentricity that prevents her from seeing things the way that they really are.

If we consider a slightly more modern example, one of my favorite movies is *Some Like It Hot* with Marilyn Monroe and Jack Lemmon. In *Some Like It Hot*, Joe and Jerry have to disguise themselves as female musicians to escape Chicago, but they only end up in that situation because Joe has gambled all of their money. He's acting in an egocentric way, which drives him and Jerry into that situation.

What's interesting about *Some Like It Hot* is there's a very clear use of disguise to illustrate this confusion over identity. To escape Chicago, Joe and Jerry disguise themselves as 'Josephine' and 'Daphne' on board a train of female musicians. If you haven't seen *Some Like It Hot*, I really do recommend it. It's both hilarious, and also an archetypal comedy plot.

But fundamentally at the heart of every comedy story is this confusion over identity. This is where you can start to think about your own story. When have you ended up in a situation where there has been confusion over roles and identities? Potentially you could have been at the root of the confusion. Potentially you showed up in a situation presenting yourself in a way that was

incongruous with the real you, or incongruous with your beliefs. Or when have you ended up in a situation where you've misjudged someone, or misjudged their abilities? Maybe you misjudged someone else's role.

In any previous jobs, have you been in a managerial role where you've made these assumptions about people and got it wrong? That potentially gives you the basis of a comedy plot.

Another way this confusion over identity can manifest itself is as **division**. Just recently I was watching Disney's latest movie, *Encanto*, which is set in Columbia. (And we are watching it because my three year old son is obsessed with it.) But *Encanto* is also a comedy plot. It's not full of your chair funny, which is important because it doesn't have to be funny to be a comedy plot.

Yes, a comedy plot *can* be funny and there can be humorous elements, and the humor often derives from the fact that we as the audience can see through the confusion. We can see people's real identities, but the protagonists can't. And that's partly where the humor comes from.

In *Encanto*, the confusion over identity stems from a division in the family. We as the audience can see that the Madrigal family, whom the story is about, is broken and divided. But the family members can't, and that's the same forces of confusion at play.

As a comedy plot progresses, we move onto the second idea, which is the nightmarish tangle...

## 2. The Nightmarish Tangle

After the initial confusion, things don't immediately resolve. The characters in the story don't immediately see the errors of their ways. They don't immediately see each other for who they really are. They carry on acting in egocentric ways, and dig themselves into a bigger hole.

In a novel or in a play or in a movie, this will go on for quite a long time. You'll end up with lovers who are not the protagonist's true love. You'll end up with dark characters coming in, who in some respects take advantage of the hero.

We see this in *War and Peace*, when Anatole and Helene Kuragin take advantage of Pierre. We as the audience can see through this. As you read *War and Peace*, it's pretty obvious that the Kuragins are not good. They are a bad force in the story. They are bad news. We can see that, but Pierre can't. For much of the story he's blind to the true nature of the situation.

So we end up with this nightmarish tangle, where the hero of the story ends up in a situation that is almost unsolvable. People get married to the wrong people. People end up in the wrong circles.

In a business setting, perhaps you end up in business with someone you should never have gone into business with. That's one application. Did you start a business with someone who you thought was different to how they ultimately turned out to be? That potentially is a comedy story.

In my project with Brian, we don't quite get the same nightmarish tangle in terms of I didn't go off and marry the wrong person, but the situation does get worse. After Brian hired the other copywriter, he didn't immediately see the error of his ways. The situation got worse before it got better.

After Brian on-boarded this copywriter, nothing happened for a really long time. Then eventually when the emails did get written, they were no good. They were written in cliches.

And the more of a nightmarish tangle you can create, the bigger a hole you can dig, the better the story is going to be.

### 3. Egocentricity

The third idea, which in some respects we've already touched on, is the fact that the dark energy in the comedy plot stems from the egocentric behavior of one of the main characters, which may actually be in part the hero. This only resolves when the hero of the story has a 'moment of clarity' where they see through their egocentric behavior.

This eventually happens in my meeting with Brian, when I'm meeting him face to face, and he realizes that working with me to write his emails would've been the right option all along. But he has to arrive at that realization on his own.

If I was developing that story, I would slow down the story at that point. I would introduce dialogue. I would bring you as the reader into the story by describing the things he said. Maybe the expression on his face changed slightly as that realization happened.

So the egocentric behavior is only overcome by this 'moment of clarity', where the main characters finally see each other for who they really are. The confusion is lifted and that paves away for the happy ending in the story.

In the comedy plot, there *is* always a happy ending in the story. Even in *Some Like It Hot*, Daphne ultimately ends up engaged to Osgood who is a rich millionaire. Who even though is a man declares that it doesn't matter, saying, "well, nobody is perfect". Which is the final line of the movie.

So we ultimately get this resolution. The web of nightmarish entanglements finally untangles itself. In *War and Peace*, this takes quite a bit of time because the web of nightmarish complexity was quite complex. But in your story, in a business story, it could be quite quick. But in telling a business story that leans on the comedy plot, it's potentially quite a simple structure because we are really going from:

- An initial misunderstanding about roles and identities
- To the nightmarish tangle where things get worse
- To the 'moment of clarity' where the key actors in the story see each other for who they really are
- Which paves the way for the final resolution in the story, or the happy ending.

The reason why this is so useful is because this is a very human thing. It's a very human thing to mis-gauge each other; to not see people for who they really are, especially when either we or they are acting in an egocentric behavior.

Either we're pursuing our goals at all costs, or the other person is pursuing their goal at all costs, and that prevents them from seeing us as we really are. So this is a very normal thing, and it means that you can tell stories about regular routine events, and just focus on the human interactions.

The comedy plot is about human interactions. It's about daily interactions. It's about daily goings on. Daily misunderstandings. It could be a simple misunderstanding that's resolved quite quickly or it could be quite a big event. I think for a business story, if you went into business with the wrong person, if you partnered with the wrong supplier, if you got involved in the wrong market or with the wrong company, that's potential material for a comedy plot.

Would you put it at the heart of your marketing to illustrate your core message? I don't know. I don't think so. I think potentially it's doable if you've got a story about how you originally set out in business with the wrong people or with the wrong person. But for me, the comedy plot is more of a supportive plot. It maybe isn't the plot that sits at the heart of your marketing. I think the plots that sit at the heart of your marketing are more likely to be Rags to Riches, Voyage and Return, or Rebirth.

It feels to me like those are more central plots, while comedy and tragedy play more of a supporting role. Once you've told your main story, obviously you can't just tell people the same story over and over. You need multiple stories. It feels to me like the comedy plot is probably better used when you've already delivered one of the previous plots, and you now want to deepen the relationship with your reader. Now you want to carry on telling them stories. You've already got their attention. The comedy plot is good for nurturing and deepening that relationship, because it's a human story, which makes it relatable. If people can relate to you, that's what's going to build trust.

## Recap

We're at the end of today's episode, so let's do a bit of a recap...

Today's episode has been all about plot five of Christopher Booker's Seven Basic Plots, which is the comedy plot. If you read *The Seven Basic Plots* book, Christopher Booker goes to great lengths to describe the different flavors and variations of the comedy plot. He explores how the comedy plot emerged in ancient Greece, but since then has retained a number of key elements.

One of those elements is confusion. Confusion over identities was the first idea that we looked at.

In telling a comedy story, the basis of the plot is a confusion between key actors in the story: a confusion over identity or role. People don't initially see each other for who they really are. This creates the 'nightmarish tangle', which is the second idea. Things have to get worse before they get better.

If you are writing an email sequence, you might focus a lot of time on the nightmarish tangle. For instance, you could create a three part email sequence where the tangle gets worse and worse, until finally it gets to almost breaking point. We as the reader are left wondering: how is this ever going to resolve? As the reader we shouldn't see a way out of the situation.

The nightmarish tangle will continue for as long as one of the main characters is acting in an egocentric way, because it's this egocentric behavior that is driving the nightmarish tangle.

So the third idea was egocentricity. In a comedy plot, one of the characters has to be acting in an egocentric way. It's that egocentricity that drives the story. Once we have the 'moment of clarity' where that character sees the error of their ways, then the confusion lifts and paves the way for the happy ending.

The comedy plot is really about a journey from not seeing relationships as they really are, to seeing things with greater clarity. That journey from confusion to clarity is what the comedy plot illustrates.

I think the comedy plot is useful for business purposes, but I think it probably should play more of a supporting role rather than a lead role in your business storytelling.

On next week's episode, we'll look at the sister plot of comedy, which is tragedy.

## What else is going on in Story Copywriter land?

Well, I'm still doing a lot of running. As I mentioned last time, I'm training for the Sheffield Half Marathon, although training for the half marathon at the moment has been more like 'swimming'. It is raining a lot in the springtime in England, so I'm getting wet a lot on my runs.

Other than that, I'm spending a lot of time with the kids. It feels like my son has birthday parties to go to every weekend, and in some respects my social life exists to ferry him around to different parties. I was thinking the other day that in terms of my story, this illustrates that the story isn't always about me, but about the people I connect with. Maybe that's another example of moving from egocentricity to seeing whole, or seeing things more completely.

We are getting towards the end of Christopher Booker's Seven Basic Plots now. We only have tragedy and rebirth yet to go. As always, if you've had value from the podcast, please do make sure you're subscribed to the podcast updates at [www.storycopywriters.com/notes](http://www.storycopywriters.com/notes). And please

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