

# Hitting the Funny Bone

**S.J. PERELMAN**  
DEMONSTRATES  
THE FINER  
POINTS OF  
CRAFTING SATIRE

## Who Was S.J. Perelman?

As one of the great American humor writers of the 20th century and a die-hard New Yorker, Sidney Joseph Perelman has been called the artistic godfather to Woody Allen. Born in Brooklyn, New York, on February 1, 1904, Perelman spent most of his life in New York City, with the exception of four years at Brown University in Providence, R.I.

In college, Perelman edited the school humor magazine. He began his professional career as a cartoonist for a New York newspaper, but quickly switched to writing. In the 1930s, he wrote screenplays for the Marx brothers' popular comedies, including *Monkey Business* and *Horse Feathers*.

Although his screenplay for *Around the World in Eighty Days* won an Academy Award in 1956, Perelman was best known for his satirical writings for *The New Yorker* magazine. From 1931 until his death in 1979, Perelman penned for the magazine humor pieces that ranged from screwball spoofs to highly perceptive parodies. He was a master of puns, sarcasm, dialogue, and comic timing, but first and foremost, he was a master of the English language. Perelman's precise descriptions and command of tone are what make his writing funny and fresh, even today.



## How to Write From Models:

**>> READ THE EXCERPT THROUGH ONCE WITHOUT READING THE NOTES.**

**>> READ IT A SECOND TIME, WITH THE NOTES.**

**>> THINK ABOUT WRITING YOUR OWN VERSION.**

**>> USE THE PROMPTS AT THE END TO WRITE YOUR OWN PIECE OF SATIRE.**

1. The first sentence begins ordinarily but takes the reader by surprise with the mention of a “nervous breakdown” at the end.

(from “Insert Flap ‘A’ and Throw Away”)

One stifling summer afternoon last August, in the attic of a tiny stone house in Pennsylvania, I made a most interesting discovery: the shortest, cheapest method of inducing a nervous breakdown ever perfected. In this technique (eventually adopted by the psychology department of Duke University, which will adopt anything), the subject is placed in a sharply sloping attic heated to 340° F and given a mothproof closet known as the Jiffy-Cloz to assemble.

The Jiffy-Cloz, procurable at any department store or neighborhood insane asylum, consists of half a dozen gigantic sheets of red cardboard, two plywood doors, a clothes rack, and a packet of staples. With these is included a set of instructions mimeographed in pale-violet ink, fruity with phrases like “Pass Section F through Slot AA, taking care not to fold tabs behind washers (see Fig. 9).” The cardboard is so processed that as the subject struggles convulsively to force the staple through, it suddenly buckles, plunging the staple deep into his thumb. He thereupon springs up with a dolorous cry and smites his knob (Section K) on the rafters (RR).

2. This passage is a spoof on the idea of a psychology experiment. Perelman sustains the joke throughout by referring to himself as “the subject” and writing in a formal third-person voice.

3. Here, Perelman adopts the language of a psychologist and of the directions in order to make fun of them. Although the sentence pretends to lay out the objective facts of the situation, words like “insane asylum” and “fruity” betray the author’s real feelings.

4. Perelman heightens the physical comedy by suggesting that the directions actually refer to him stapling his thumb and hitting his head.

FROM “INSERT FLAP ‘A’ AND THROW AWAY”  
FROM THE MOST OF S.J. PERELMAN.  
BY PERMISSION OF HAROLD OBER ASSOCIATES.

continued →

5. Part of the humor comes from the fact that he still hasn't succeeded in making his closet airtight, so the moths will get in anyway.

As a final demonic touch, the Jiffy-Cloz people cunningly omit four of the staples necessary to finish the job, so that after indescribable purgatory, the best the subject can possibly achieve is a sleazy, capricious structure which would reduce any self-respecting moth to helpless laughter. The cumulative frustration, the tropical heat, and the soft, ghostly chuckling of the moths are calculated to unseat the strongest mentality.

6. The last sentence delivers the punchline: that Perelman's experience was really a psychological experiment designed to make a sane person crazy—and it worked.

## SPIN IT LIKE S.J.

USE THESE PROMPTS TO WRITE YOUR OWN SATIRE

**1 Think of a time** when you were really frustrated, then imagine that the situation was intentionally designed to drive you crazy. Maybe the bus driver planned to pull away from the curb just as you were running up so he could splash dirty water all over your best pants. Why would he do this?

**2 Review Note #1.** In a satire, the element of surprise is particularly important. Try to open your passage as if it were completely straightforward, then introduce the twist of humor.

**3 Review Note #2.** You will need to decide the best way to write your piece. You may choose to write in the first, second, or third person. Your voice may be formal or informal, understated or over the

top. Whatever you choose to do, be consistent throughout.

**4 Review Notes #3 and #4.** The words you choose will have a great impact on the humor of your piece. You may want to satirize a formal vocabulary the way that Perelman did, or you may want to adopt slang to convey the flavor of your experience.

**5 Review Note #5.** Irony is a great tool in humor writing. Look for the irony in your situation and be sure to underscore it.

**6 Review Note #6.** End on a high note. The hardest thing about writing humor is getting the last line right. Keep revising until you have a zinger.