

COMEDY SET-UPS AND PAY-OFFS



Timing the Set-up and Pay-off

Timing is everything in comedy. You accomplish this by using set-ups and pay-offs. They are characterized by a gap between initial information and final information, where the viewer hears something which is only part of the story, perhaps a foreshadowing of things to come or an invitation to learn or experience something more.

Clearly something is missing which instantly prompts the viewer to ask questions or make their own guesses as to what's coming next. The pay-off closes the gap in the viewer's mind.

In comedy, the gap can be filled with funny dialog and/or unexpected comical situations. Good comedy is fast-paced so the set-ups and pay-offs happen very quickly.

How to Create Powerful Set-ups and Pay-offs

Here are some ways to create powerful set-ups and pay-offs:

1. Connect topsy-turvy ideas or situations that go together.
2. Connect ideas or situations that are completely diametrically opposed so that the gap takes the audience completely by surprise.
3. Put your character in funny situations that heighten the comedy, such as taking a person who is very orderly, neat and scared of anything that causes chaos and plunging him into chaotic situations that are completely beyond his control so that he can't handle it.
4. Play out the absurd situation or funny statement repeatedly in the gap to capitalize on the comedy. Slapstick comedy uses this technique quite a bit, especially where a clumsy person is constantly falling or bumping into things.

Case Study of the Set-ups and Pay-offs in the Blockbuster Movie *Hangover*

The blockbuster film *Hangover* makes great use of all of these. The entire film is a set-up and pay-off. They toast to “a night to remember” and in the very next scene, they can’t remember anything - a diametrically opposed situation. In the gap period, they play on the amnesia repeatedly and connect similar topsy turvy situations as the characters try to find their friend.

A good part of the comedy also derives from the fact that they place a goody-two shoes character afraid of his own shadow in outrageous situations that are completely beyond his control and have him do things he would normally never do. First, he finds himself in a destroyed hotel suit which he reluctantly placed on his credit card. If that’s not bad enough, next he discovers that overnight he got married to a call girl with a baby. How could things get worse? He gets arrested by the police for stealing a cop car. Things go down hill from there.

The final pay-offs come when they learn why they can’t remember anything and why the mattress was dangling off the top of the sky-scraper hotel.

Set forth below are several examples of blockbuster comedies and how they use set-ups and pay-offs. Notice how fast the set-ups and pay-offs come in each of the clips.

Hangover

The movie trailer for the blockbuster movie *Hangover* is replete with examples of set-up and pay-off. Notice how they use dialog for the set-up and close the gap with situational comedy. The trailer immediately lets you know that the film is predicated on “a night to remember” and in the scenes that follow, they can’t remember anything. Notice how quickly the set-up and pay-off happen and how they use this repeatedly throughout the movie trailer, filling the gap with more and more absurd topsy turvy situations that play off their amnesia so that the viewer is totally hooked and compelled to go see the film to find out what happened that night. Click the link below or watch on the membership website under Case Studies for this respective blog entry.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMuv_OqxWGw

A Fish Called Wanda

The next two videos are from *A Fish Called Wanda*, where Otto asks Archie to apologize for calling him stupid. This is a classic form of situational comedy. The set-up comes from taking a prim and proper British Barrister who doesn’t show any emotion and placing him at the mercy of a crazy American. What makes the second scene so funny in the movie is the way the director chose to convey the apology with the camera angle. Click the links below or watch on the membership website under Case Studies for this respective blog entry.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZK_mqgVLU4

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpHWr7GgzMg>

Harry Met Sally

The next video is the famous fake orgasm scene from *Harry Met Sally*. The set-up comes from the dialog between the characters and the pay-off comes when Sally sets out to prove him wrong. With his male egotistic comments, Harry actually sets himself up for what follows. A little piece of movie trivia, the last line in the scene was not a scripted line. It was improved on set. Click the link below or watch on the membership website under Case Studies for this respective blog entry.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFpnPZpFTEk>

Austin Powers

In the next video from *Austin Powers*, the set-up and pay-off comes in the form of funny dialog. The viewer wonders how Dr. Evil will kill Austin Powers in a shark pit where there are no sharks. The pay-off comes in the absurdity of what they actually have in the shark-pit to kill them. Click the link below or watch on the membership website under Case Studies for this respective blog entry.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bh7bYNAHXxw>