

Humor Writing: Channeling Erma

By Diane Laney Fitzpatrick

We writers all have our heroes. Depending on your genre, personal taste, and even reading experiences that go back as far as grade school, your writing hero might be Edgar Allen Poe or Tolkien, Hemingway or Jane Austen; Mark Twain or James Patterson.

But ask a humor writer to list his role models and you'll almost certainly find Erma Bombeck.

More than twenty years after her death, Bombeck's relatable, self-deprecating stories still have the uncanny ability to leave readers laughing out loud, not so much at her, but at themselves. You don't have to be a mother to laugh at Erma's take on parenting. ("Once they put a hamster on my chest and when I bolted upright they asked, 'Do you have any alcohol for the chemistry set?'"") You don't have to be married to snort at her conversations with her husband, ("Remember when that kid wanted to borrow your inner-tube last summer at the pool and you weren't wearing one?") and you don't have to be a housewife to smile out loud when Erma gets going on housework. ("My second favorite household chore is ironing. My first being hitting my head on the top bunk bed until I faint.") Erma Bombeck's relatability is what made her one of the country's favorite humorists.

She made it look so easy. As a reader, it appeared as though Erma's stories naturally flowed out of her typewriter like water from a toilet that has had a teddy bear stuffed down it with a hockey stick. The inside story, though, is that there was a carefully crafted method to her writing.

Her standard for good humor writing is laid out in the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop, a University of Dayton biennial workshop and writing competition that follows Erma's basic advice for humor writing. Among other tips, she suggests three simple steps:

Hook 'em with the lead.

Hold 'em with laughter.

Exit with a quip they won't forget.

I had been writing a humor blog for several years when I began to use Erma's three tips as part of my writing. With that as my foundation, I mapped out a schedule for turning out one column or blog post per week. Spread out over six days, I worked in time batches, which gave me some intermittent distance, which is so important to me. Binge writing and all-nighters I can't do. And all writers agree that walking away from your work-in-progress is the only way to keep it fresh.

Day 1: Pick a topic and sketch it out

It's deceiving, but this is not the easiest day. Here's what I used to do: I sit down to write my column and I go through my list of ideas; One catches my eye and I start to write it. It's not working, I keep struggling along, hoping for a breakthrough that never comes. This is not a good topic and it's not going to be a good column, but I hang in there. This exercise in futility could last for days; hours of writing a piece that a small part of me knows will never see the light of day. A big fat waste of time.

On Day 1 my task is to "pick a lane, Elaine" and get the ball rolling. If the words don't come, toss it and pick another idea, but by the end of your writing stint on Day 1 you'll have made a commitment with a topic that works. And you'll have a few things jotted down.

Day 2: Write the bulk

This is the most time-consuming day. Schedule this day for when you can set aside some uninterrupted writing. Write to your desired length, get the flow right, compose it as close to a final product as you can. Write the bones and then put the flesh on.

I use Erma's writing advice throughout this step. Write what you know. If you're going to make fun of someone, make fun of yourself. Make good use of exaggeration. Be unpredictable. If I'm struggling with the voice, I read some of my old columns, preferably the funniest ones.

Day 3: Hook 'em with the lead

Now I focus on my lead. I already have one, because I wrote it on Day 2, but I experiment with new ones. If my original lead is decent, I try to make it better. Because this is the most important part of your piece. If you don't hook your readers here, they'll never get to your fall-off-your-chair-laughing analogy in graph eleven.

In addition to making it phenomenal, your lead must be funny. It absolutely has to be funny. Humor writing isn't something you gradually phase in to your readers. You have to bring humor to the initial handshake.

Dave Barry, another great humor writer, said, "Put the funniest sentence at the beginning of the story." That's how you hook 'em.

Day 4: Exit with a quip they won't forget

"I like zingers at the end," Bombeck said. "I always like surprises. It's the O. Henry Syndrome." Writing an ending for a blog post or column is not my strong suit. It's the most difficult part of writing for me. I blame my background in newswriting, which taught me an inverted pyramid style writing, where there was no ending. The least important part of a news story is at the end, where it could be cut by a composing room staffer, who doesn't have to use any news judgement whatsoever to make a story fit.

So for me, Day 4 is tough. More often than not, I simply fail at writing a good ending quip and what I end up with is easily forgettable. But I keep trying. And I keep reading Erma's endings in the hopes of figuring it out.

Day 5: Hold 'em with laughter

"Funny it up." That's what I call Day 5. I go through the piece and I look for missed opportunities to make people laugh. Every sentence should either be laugh-out-loud funny or a lead-in to an outstanding punch line. I search for ways to use humor writing techniques like the [rule of three](#), putting the punchline or funny words at the end of the sentence, exaggeration, antithesis, and just flat-out jokes.

Day 6: Proofread, accessorize and publish

Whether you're on par with Bombeck or you have a readership of your mom and your two aunts, editing and proofreading are of utmost importance. If your piece is full of mistakes, you won't be making anyone laugh. Your readers will be too distracted, worrying about where the next mistake is.

Before you publish, accessorize. Choose a photo to go with your blog post, write a short summary for promos, update your bio boilerplate to reflect the topic of this particular post, and construct a couple of social media lead-ins to your post link. How you tee up your column is the gateway to getting readers in the door, and how all that is written is just as important as the post itself. You may not have the ready readership of Erma, but you can build an enticing introduction to your hilarious piece.

How's that for an ending? Was that good? I'm working on it.

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Diane is the author of [Great-Grandma Is on Twitter and Other Signs the Rapture Is Near](#) and [Home Sweet Homes: How Bundt Cakes, Bubble Wrap, and My Accent Helped Me Survive Nine Moves](#). She writes a humor blog, "[Just Humor Me](#)," and is working on a third book and her first screenplay. A former journalist, she lives in San Francisco.

