

## STAND-UP COMEDY and the politics of laughter

### GET READY

1) Do you know these stand-up comedians? Match the pictures with the names.

Ms Maisel, Trevor Noah, Hannah Gadsby, Ricky Gervais



A.



B.



C.



D.

2) Where are they from? *Australia / Great Britain / South Africa / The United States*

- A. Trevor Noah is from \_\_\_\_\_. He is \_\_\_\_\_.
- B. \_\_\_\_\_. She is \_\_\_\_\_.
- C. \_\_\_\_\_. He is \_\_\_\_\_.
- D. \_\_\_\_\_. She is \_\_\_\_\_.

3) a) Think of the following questions and note down ideas to answer them.

- Do you enjoy watching stand-up comedy?
- Who are your favorite stand-up comedians? Why? What do you like about them?

b) Now, imagine the examiner asks you these questions. Answer orally, as if you were talking to the examiner.

#### 4) Vocabulary

Fill in each blank with the appropriate word from the box.

*an open mic, a stand-up comedian, a one-liner, a gig, flopping, a routine, a punchline, a bit*

- 1) This \_\_\_\_\_ made everyone roar with laughter. It was a short joke, but it was hilarious!
- 2) There's \_\_\_\_\_ night at the comedy club tonight. I know you are afraid of \_\_\_\_\_, but you have to go on stage and do your new \_\_\_\_\_! You'll never become a good \_\_\_\_\_ unless you practice!
- 3) I want to become a comic but it is really hard to get a real \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4) Trevor Noah's monologue was really good tonight. I particularly liked his \_\_\_\_\_ about airport security.
- 5) If you want to make sure your audience is in stitches, remember that the delivery of the \_\_\_\_\_ is everything.

## Document 1

### Cancel culture killing comedy? What a joke!

Rachel Aroesti, Tue 10 Aug 2021, *The Guardian*

Is cancel culture destroying comedy? A lot of comedians seem to think so. John Cleese has said that “wokeness” will “\_\_\_\_\_ creativity”. Chris Rock attributed all the “unfunny TV shows” he sees to the fact that “everybody’s scared to make a move”. Shappi Khorsandi wrote: “The fear of being ‘cancelled’ is real and it will be the death of standup comedy as we know it.”

5 Ricky Gervais – also on Times Radio – said the BBC had become “more and more careful” and nowadays “would worry about some of the jokes” in *The Office*. In June, Jennifer Saunders’s comments on the matter **made headlines** in Mail Online: “Jennifer Saunders says Absolutely Fabulous wouldn’t be **commissioned** today in Britain’s ‘woke’ culture”.

10 It’s starting to sound like a chorus – and the idea that so-called cancel culture is killing comedy is in danger of becoming \_\_\_\_\_ (being “cancelled” encompasses everything from **criticism** by a handful of social media users to being fired from your job and **shunned** by society). **Actual** examples of it happening, however, are **thin on the ground** – as are coherent arguments. “Apparently, comedians are scared to say anything for fear of cancellation,” wrote the standup Robin Ince recently. “I don’t know who these comedians are and I don’t know what they are too scared to say.”

15 The anxiety may be a nebulous one, but it clearly exists. It makes a certain amount of sense: comedy is a pressure valve, a brief, blissful \_\_\_\_\_ from everyday challenges and existential **dread**. It relies on shock, subversion and a little bit of \_\_\_\_\_ to **fulfil** an important social function. How could it do so if it were only permitted to **parrot** the views approved by a mysterious, vocal minority – the “haters”, the “joke police” – on Twitter? It couldn’t. That wouldn’t be  
20 comedy at all.

The good news is: it isn’t. If all the aforementioned comedians know that cancel culture is stifling comedy because they are effectively censoring themselves, they can stop now. In the vast majority of cases, people who make jokes that are considered \_\_\_\_\_ in the broadest possible terms  
25 \_\_\_\_\_ zero repercussions – in fact, they tend to **thrive**. Jimmy Carr was still making jokes about **dwarfism**, lesbians and Gypsies in his 2019 tour show. How has society punished him? By giving him a series of increasingly prominent TV gigs. Dave Chappelle faced criticism for **material** about trans people, Chinese people, and child abuse in his 2019 standup show, *Sticks & Stones*. Was he shunned? No, he was awarded the Grammy for best comedy album.

30 Widespread online criticism of a joke deemed offensive almost never leads to any actual consequences. Very occasionally, in very extreme cases, there is some **pushback**. In July, the standup Andrew Lawrence was dropped by his agent and had gigs cancelled after tweeting racist remarks (it would be a stretch to call them jokes) about the footballers who missed penalties at the Euro 2020 final. Last year, the comedian Sarah Silverman claimed she was \_\_\_\_\_ from a film after an old sketch in which she wore blackface resurfaced online. But that seems an unusual repercussion: Jimmy Kimmel, Jimmy Fallon and Tina  
35 Fey have all apologised for the use of blackface in their work with no impact on their careers.

\_\_\_\_\_, the argument that cancel culture is killing comedy dissolves into nothingness. In fact, as Gervais has pointed out, the opposite is true: “**PC culture** isn’t killing comedy. It’s driving it. As it always did,” he tweeted in 2019.

## A. Comprehension

### 1) Vocabulary:

- a) Fill in the blanks in the text with the following words and expressions:

*received wisdom, release, when you get down to it, dropped, offensive, stifle, transgression, face*

- b) Match the bolded words in the text with their French equivalents below.

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| a. Réels  | h. Remplir                  |
| b. Prospérer  | i. Le politiquement correct |
| c. Terreur  | j. Le nanisme               |
| d. Répéter comme un perroquet                         | k. Mis au ban, évité, boudé |
| e. Ont fait les gros titres, ont défrayé la chronique | l. Réaction négative        |
| f. Du contenu   | m. Une critique             |
| g. Rares  | n. Commandité               |

- 2) General comprehension: briefly present the text (*type, headline, author, source, date, topic*).

---

---

---

---

---

- 3) True or false? Circle the right answer and justify with a quote from the text.

- a. T / F : Robin Ince is scared of cancel culture.

---

- b. T / F : Jimmy Carr's career suffered a blow because he made jokes about dwarfism, lesbians and gypsies.

---

- c. T / F : All comedians who used blackface in the past have now been cancelled.

---

- 4) In your own words, explain what cancel culture is and why some comedians feel scared of it.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

5) What is the journalist's opinion on the impact of cancel culture on comedy?

---

---

---

---

6) a- Match the comedians mentioned in the text with their pictures.

*John Cleese, Chris Rock, Shappi Khorsandi, Jennifer Saunders, Ricky Gervais, Robin Ince, Jimmy Carr, Dave Chappelle, Andrew Lawrence, Sarah Silverman, Jimmy Kimmel, Jimmy Fallon, Tina Fey*

b- Pick some of them and look them up.

Where are they from? What are they famous for? What kind of comedy do they do? Find a video of them to see what kind of humour they use. Then summarise the information you have found.



## B. Grammaire

### 1) **Can: aptitude, possibilité, permission**

Can we laugh about anything?

Can I go now?

My sister can be very funny.

I can't go with you, I have class.

If all the aforementioned comedians know that cancel culture is stifling comedy because they are effectively censoring themselves, they can stop now.

- On utilise *can* pour exprimer la capacité/aptitude, la possibilité, la permission. Dans les phrases ci-dessus, expliquez quel est le sens de *can* (il peut y en avoir plusieurs).
- Can* est un \_\_\_\_\_ modal. Ce n'est pas un verbe ordinaire. Le verbe qui le suit est toujours à l'infinitif (= base verbale). *Can* n'est JAMAIS suivi de *to*. Il ne prend pas de -s à la troisième personne du singulier.
- Comment former des phrases avec *can* ?

Forme affirmative : \_\_\_\_\_

Forme négative : \_\_\_\_\_

Forme interrogative : \_\_\_\_\_

- Exercice : Faites des phrases avec *can* en utilisant les mots donnés.

a) You / be / + funny / Ricky Gervais / ?

\_\_\_\_\_

b) Everyone / not / be / = funny / Tina Fey

\_\_\_\_\_

c) My friend believes / you / not / make jokes / about / race

\_\_\_\_\_

d) I / teach you / how to / make / + good / jokes

\_\_\_\_\_

e) Comedians / be / = political / they want / ?

\_\_\_\_\_

### 2) **Conseiller et justifier**

Comedians should watch what they say so (that) they don't get cancelled.

You shouldn't mock others (just) to be funny.

People should watch standup in order to relax.

You should be politically correct in order not to hurt anyone.

Comedians should be careful because what they say can hurt people.

- Nous avons vu que l'on pouvait utiliser l'impératif pour donner des conseils. On peut également utiliser l'\_\_\_\_\_ modal *should* + base verbale (*shouldn't* + base verbale à la forme négative). L'effet produit est-il le même quand on emploie l'impératif que quand on emploie *should/shouldn't* ?

NB : les auxiliaires modaux comme *should* ne sont jamais suivis de *to*. Le verbe qui suit n'est pas conjugué : on utilise la base verbale (ex : *I should go*).

b) Notez les expressions utilisées pour exprimer :

parce que : \_\_\_\_\_

afin que : \_\_\_\_\_ (+ sujet-verbe-complément)

afin de : \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ (+infinitif)

afin de ne pas : \_\_\_\_\_ (+ infinitif)

NB : notez bien la position de *not* dans *in order not to*. Il se place AVANT *to*.

c) Practice – Fill in the blanks with the underlined forms above.

a. Comics \_\_\_\_\_ laugh at disabled people \_\_\_\_\_ make people laugh.

b. You \_\_\_\_\_ come to the theatre \_\_\_\_\_ I am sure you will love the show!

c. My parents \_\_\_\_\_ watch more standup \_\_\_\_\_ they can laugh a little.

d. You \_\_\_\_\_ study \_\_\_\_\_ fail your exam.

### C. Discussion & Writing

Can we laugh about anything? Is it okay to make fun of others in order to be funny? Are there some topics that should not be joked about? Have you ever been offended by a joke?

1- Answer some of the questions above, using a few strong arguments and pertinent examples.

>> Use *can / can't* and *should / shouldn't* and justify your answers.

>> Link your arguments with appropriate linkers (*besides, however, on the one hand / on the other hand etc.*)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2. Speaking: Now, practice your arguments orally. Do not read your notes and make shorter sentences.

Why not record yourself and listen again.



The 2014 Opening Night Comedy Allstars Supershow - Hannah Gadsby

Trigger warning: strong language. Mention of rape.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=JHVuQjINh-Y>

I. Comprehension

1) General comprehension

Watch the video clip. What/who is Hannah using as material for her bit?

---

---

---

**Part 1 · 00'00-00'35** – Watch this bit again and answer the questions.

2) Does Hannah say that she enjoys doing televised shows like this?

---

3) Pay attention to her body language and intonation. Does she mean what she is saying – does she really love these shows?

---

**Part 2 · 00'36-01'58** – Watch this bit again and answer the questions.

4) Fill in the blanks

But I usually get a bit of \_\_\_\_\_ from one of those types after I do one of these. A bit of feedback. Last year was a good one, from a chap on \_\_\_\_\_. “Social” is a strong word. But, he was a man, I assumed he was a man, um, Mister Man. Anonymous Mister Man said to me – this is his feedback, he said, “you fat ugly bitch”! Oh, strong start! Bigger finish, though. He said, “You fat ugly bitch, you wouldn’t be raped in a men’s prison on a \_\_\_\_\_!”

It’s alright, \_\_\_\_\_? Um, we do need to unpack that though, \_\_\_\_\_? Hello, if you’re watching.

We do have to unpack that, because he’s made some bold assumptions, \_\_\_\_\_? Not least that days of the week matter in prison? What is this prison?

“I can’t wait for Saturday night! It’s craft and rape night!”

And why \_\_\_\_\_ in a men’s prison?



**Part 3· 01'58-3'10**

5) Which part of the insult does she agree with? What other adjective does she use?

---

---

6) What argument does she use to prove that she is not a “bitch”?

---

---

7) What argument does she use to prove that she is not “ugly”?

---

---

**Part 4· 3'10-3'43**

8) “So, I’m fat. That’s my \_\_\_\_\_. I’m fat.”

9) What does she say that she should do about this? Why?

---

---

10) What is the punchline?

---

---

---

**II. Analysis**

1) What type of humour does Hannah Gadsby use a lot in this clip?

---

---

2) How did this bit make you feel? Did you find it funny? Did you find it disturbing? Did it make you cringe? Why?

---

---

---

---

- 3) In her later show *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby said that she did not want to use self-deprecating humour anymore: "Do you understand what self-deprecating means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation."  
Do you agree with her? Did you find her bit humiliating? Do you often use self-deprecating humour?

---

---

---

---

---

### III. Grammaire

- 1) Demander confirmation avec les *question tags*.

Un *question tag* sert à demander une confirmation. Le plus souvent, ils sont rhétoriques et n'appellent pas vraiment de réponse (= n'est-ce pas ?).

Formez des *question tags*:

It's alright, \_\_\_\_\_?

Um, we do need to unpack that though, \_\_\_\_\_?

He's made some bold assumptions, \_\_\_\_\_?

Comment forme-t-on un tag ?

- On reprend l' \_\_\_\_\_ de la phrase principale. S'il n'y a pas d'auxiliaire dans la phrase, on utilise l'auxiliaire \_\_\_\_\_ (ou \_\_\_\_\_ au prétérit). Si le verbe de la phrase principale est le verbe \_\_\_\_\_, alors c'est lui qui est utilisé dans le tag.
- Si la phrase principale est positive, le *tag* sera \_\_\_\_\_. On ajoutera donc l'adverbe \_\_\_\_\_ après l'auxiliaire. Si la phrase est négative, le *tag* sera \_\_\_\_\_.
- Enfin, vient le \_\_\_\_\_ de la phrase, sous forme de pronom personnel, puis un point d'interrogation.

Rappel - les pronoms personnels : I, you, \_\_\_\_\_

Exercice : Complétez avec des *tags*.

- There are a couple of other problems, \_\_\_\_\_?
- This idea solves the problem, \_\_\_\_\_?
- You are studying, \_\_\_\_\_?
- I shouldn't go out tonight, \_\_\_\_\_?
- That's quite normal, \_\_\_\_\_?
- We haven't seen that before, \_\_\_\_\_?

g. He would call me if he knew I was here, \_\_\_\_\_?

### Document 3

#### **Test Yourself: Psychologists Created a Quiz to Define Your Sense of Humor**

*The Cut*, April 2017

The HSQ (Humor Styles Questionnaire) divides humor into four main styles: Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-Defeating.

- Affiliative humor means **cracking jokes**, engaging in **banter**, and otherwise using humor to make others like us.
- Self-enhancing humor is an optimistic, **coping** humor, characterized by the ability to laugh at yourself or at the absurdity of a situation and feel better as a result.
- Aggressive humor is characterized by sarcasm, **teasing**, criticism, and ridicule.
- Self-defeating humor is attempting to get others to like us by putting ourselves down.

See for yourself which category best describes your own sense of humor (though it's important to note that the lines between humor styles aren't hard and fast, however, nor are the categories mutually exclusive — everyone's individual sense of humor is a unique combination of all four styles).

1) Vocabulary

Find the English words in the text:

- a. Un échange de plaisanteries : \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Faire face, surmonter quelque chose : \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Taquineries: \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Sortir des blagues: \_\_\_\_\_

2) Click on the following link and scroll down to take the test: <https://www.thecut.com/article/whats-your-humor-style.html>

3) Using the test results and all the work done this semester, describe your sense of humour. What cracks you up?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

4) Why not ask a friend (or your brother / sister, ...) to take the test as well? Discuss the results with this person. Do you have the same sense of humour?

Use *both*, *whereas* and the comparative to talk about the similarities and differences between you. Take notes, then share with the class.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---