

So you want to be a stand-up comic

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LEARNING HOW TO BE a stand-up comedian can be as methodical as a college curriculum or as serendipitous as reading instructions for a dog collar.

Comedian Brian Copeland had already established himself as a comic when he bought a training collar for his dog. But he was impressed at how simply the collar's instructions described both the essence of dog training and being an effective standup comedian.

It said, with all the distractions of a simple walk down the street, you must get 51 percent of the dog's attention to make him listen. In a comedy club, Copeland added gleefully, with all its distractions, you need to get 51 percent of your audience's attention for your act to go over.

That means a comedian needs to be funny for a wide range of audiences. Doing that is usually a matter of time and experience. Comics say the more stage time you get, the better you will be.

Those who train comics say they can't teach someone to be funny, but they can teach them to be funnier. Performing a routine time and again develops a consistency, which in turn builds confidence and increases your chances of appealing to an audience.

Comedy teacher Neil Leiberger tells his students to develop a solid five minutes of material, rehearse it until they have it honed to perfection, then try it out at open mic nights. He recommends that a neophyte comic perform the routine perfectly 10 or 12 times in a row before going to the next five minutes.

If you want to hone your craft, there are several comedy showcases and open mic nights at Bay Area comedy clubs. The quality of participants at these events varies from brand-new comics to veterans trying out new material (which is why open mics are popular with audiences — you never know who might show up).

But going to open mic nights won't turn you into a public speaker, necessarily.

"I still go to Toastmasters, because giving a serious speech terrifies me," says John DeKoven, a retired businessman who got into booking comedy shows so he could perform a few times a month. "Comedy's different; you can do all the uhs and ums, and nobody cares."

As for material, the idea is to find some sort of common ground with your audience, says Rick Fields, a longtime East Bay comedy club owner.

And, of course, your material has to be true to you.

"The key is sincerity," Milton Berle once said, "and when you can fake that, you've got it made."