Would you like to know a language everyone in the world understands? You already do—because you laugh. Any two people from vastly different cultures who don’t speak a word of the other’s language still know exactly what is meant when the other person laughs.

Think of laughter as the unofficial language of Earth. Yet how much do any of us really understand about humor?

On the Laugh Track

What makes things funny? READ asked John Ficarra, the editor of MAD magazine. After all, he should know. Here’s what he said: “Monkeys. They’re unbeatable. For example, show a photo of a dentist—not funny. Show a photo of a dentist with a monkey in his chair, and it’s comedy gold. Try this theory out on a few of your family photos, and you’ll see.” OK, so monkeys are funny. What else? How about this?

Two hunters were in the woods, when one collapses. He didn’t seem to be breathing. The other called the emergency number and said, “My friend is dead! What can I do?” The operator said, “Calm down, I can help. First, let’s make sure he’s dead.” After a second of silence on the hunter’s end, the operator heard a gunshot. The hunter came back on the phone and said, “OK, now what?”

If you laughed, you’re not alone. In the year 2001, that joke was voted the funniest in the world as part of a project called LaughLab.
Psychologist Richard Wiseman’s goal was to determine what makes people laugh and what is found to be funny among men and women, older and younger people, and people from different countries. His research team tested people in person and asked others to submit opinions online using a “Giggleometer,” which ranked jokes on a scale of 1–5. More than 40,000 jokes were tested.

You may be saying to yourself, “Studying jokes? Is that science?” But plenty of smart people say yes. Laughter is a biological function. It has a certain rhythm; laughter syllables build, then trail off, and they come out in a repetitive, not random, sequence. For example, “ha-ha-ho-ho-he” is typical, but “ha-ho-ha-ho-ha” or “he-ho-he” just doesn’t happen.

Babies begin to laugh instinctively when they’re about 4 months old, perhaps to form a connection with parents. Those born blind and deaf also laugh, so laughter is not dependent on sight and hearing. Other animals, notably chimps, exhibit laugh-like behavior when playing with one another. Even rats, when tickled, make high-pitched squeals that can be interpreted as laughter. (As you might guess, only a dedicated few know this firsthand.)

**Comedy Is Serious Stuff**

Comics know that the same jokes are not funny to everyone everywhere. Ed Hiestand, a writer for comedy great Johnny Carson, told READ, “Everyone who writes comedy needs to know the audience. On the Carson show, everybody would laugh on a Friday night. Nobody would laugh on a Monday.” Even within one state or town or family, senses of humor are as varied as the people are. Professional comics do not assume a 10 p.m. audience will like a joke because a 7 p.m. audience did.

Comedians who test jokes for a living say it’s hit or miss. “It’s a tough gig, and you have to have a large threshold for pain,” said stand-up Jay Nog. Performers whose jokes get a two-second laugh consider that a significant accomplishment.

Timing is critical. Starting stand-up Zubair Simonson said he’s learning the hard way that “good timing can cause a weak joke to soar, while poor timing can cause a strong joke to falter.” Authors and film actors do not often get immediate public feedback. But comics do.

What keeps the funny guys going? The laughs and after-effects. “The best humor has some sort of layer to it; it makes a statement of some kind or comment,” said Margy Yuspa, a director at Comedy Central. “An example is [Dave] Chappelle. His comedy is funny on the surface and also often comments on race or social issues.”
Funny You Said That

Comedians have their own theories about humor. “What makes us laugh is a surprise change in perspective that connects an unknown with a known idea in a unique manner,” said Ronald P. Culberson, a humorist at FUNsulting.com. “For instance, a three-legged dog walks into an Old West saloon and says, “I’m looking for the man who shot my paw.”

Ask an average person why humans laugh, and he or she would probably say, “Because something was funny.” But comics need to know what gives the giggles; their livelihood depends on it.

Comedian Anthony DeVito told READ that “people tend to laugh at things that reinforce what they already believe. Comedy tells them they’re right.”

Gary Gulman, a finalist in Last Comic Standing, a reality TV show and comedy competition, gave specifics. “Sometimes it’s a keen observation about something you thought you lived through. Sometimes it’s a juxtaposition of words. Sometimes it's a gesture or a sound. An encyclopedia couldn’t do this question justice.”

What Are You Laughing At?

Yet laughter is not always a planned response to a joke. One study found that 80 percent of the time, we laugh at something that just happens. People often laugh just because someone else does. Like a yawn, a laugh is contagious. That’s why some sit-coms use laugh tracks.

Laughter is also social, a way to bond with others. After all, how often do you laugh alone? When two or more people laugh at the same thing, it is as if nature reminds them of what they have in common.

Behavioral neuroscientist Robert R. Provine conducted a 10-year experiment in which he eavesdropped on 2,000 conversations in malls, at parties, and on city sidewalks. He found that the greatest guffaws did not follow intentionally funny statements; people laughed hardest at everyday comments that seemed funny only in a certain social context.

“What do you have a rubber band?” is not in and of itself humorous, but it is if it’s said in response to “I like Amelia so much. I wish I could get her attention.”

Theories of Funniness

There are three main theories about humor.

**Release theory**—Humor gives a break from tension. In a horror movie, as a character creeps through a dark house (often idiotically) to follow an eerie noise, he might open a door to find a cat playing with a...
squeeze toy. The audience laughs in relief. Humor also lets us deal with unpleasant or forbidden issues, such as death and violence. People are often more comfortable laughing at something shocking said by someone else, though they would never say it themselves. Comedian Keenen Ivory Wayans once said, “Comedy is the flip side of pain. The worst things that happen to you are hysterical—in retrospect. But a comedian doesn't need retrospect; he realizes it's funny while he's in the eye of the storm.”

Superiority theory—Audience members laugh at those who appear to be more stupid than they judge themselves to be. Slapstick humor, such as seeing a guy slip on a banana peel, often falls into this category. This theory dates back to Plato in ancient Greece and was prominent in the Middle Ages, when people with deformities were often employed as court jesters.

Some comedians exploited this theory by building a routine—or even a persona—around the idea that they were losers who couldn't catch a break. Larry David, David Letterman, and Woody Allen are comedians who have done this, each in his own way.

Incongruity theory—People laugh when things that are not normally associated with each other are put together. Many comedy duos, from Laurel and Hardy to David Spade and Chris Farley, feature a thin man and a fat man, a visual contrast.

People also laugh when there is a difference between what they expect to happen and what actually occurs. They are being led in a certain direction, and then that direction abruptly changes, and the unpredictability makes them laugh. Children see birds all the time without reaction, but if one flies into their classroom through an open window, they will probably explode in giggles.

Got Laughs?

What we laugh at changes as we age. Here are some examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Often Likes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young children</td>
<td>Slapstick, or silly physical humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary-school children</td>
<td>Puns, simple jokes that play off the sound rather than the meaning of a word, such as “Lettuce all go to the salad bar”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generally, children laugh more than adults. One study found that adults laugh 20 times a day, while children laugh 200 times!

**The Secrets of Humor**

Certain comedic devices turn up again and again in jokes, comic strips, and filmed entertainment—because they succeed.

“There were tricks,” said Hiestand of his days writing for *The Tonight Show* hosted by Johnny Carson, “things you would see, certain things always got laughs.” One of the most popular is often called the rule of threes. That is a pattern in which two nonfunny elements are followed by a third that is funny (yet still makes sense within the context). Many jokes start off with a list of three, such as “A rabbi, a lawyer, and a duck walk into a bar.” As the joke unfolds, the rabbi says something straightforward, then the lawyer does as well, but the duck finishes with something witty or absurd.

*Three guys were stranded on an island. An antique lamp washed ashore. When the guys touched it, a genie came out. “I’ll grant each of you one wish,” the genie said. The first guy said, “I want to go home,” then disappeared. The second guy said, “I also want to go home,” and he too disappeared. The third man suddenly looked sad. He said, “I want my two friends back to keep me company.”*

Certain concepts seem to be more amusing than others. If you tell any joke involving an animal, and it doesn’t matter which one you use, think Donald and Daffy. In the LaughLab experiment, scientists determined that the funniest animal is the duck. (It’s not arbitrary that a duck was used in the rule-of-threes joke.)
Do Tell—But Do It Right

There are also know techniques for telling jokes well.

- **Keep it short**—Don’t include any details that are not necessary to bring you to the punch line. In the genie joke, there was no need to specify it was a tropical island or to name the castaways. The quicker you tell a joke, the funnier it will be.

- **Be specific**—Some comedians swear that a joke is funnier if you say “Aquafresh” instead of “toothpaste.” The attention to detail makes the story seem more real.

- **Keep a straight face**—Deliver the joke *deadpan*, or without emotion. That way, any strangeness in the joke will seem even stranger because the person telling it doesn’t seem to notice.

- **Don’t laugh at your own joke**—Let your audience decide whether it is funny or foolish—or both.

Theories and techniques aside, much about humor remains a mystery. According to Hiestand, Carson many times said, “I don’t understand what makes comedy a sure thing. There’s no 100-percent surefire formula.” Meanwhile, for most of us, laughter is never a problem. It does not need to be solved, just enjoyed.