

Chatterbox #328 – What makes you laugh? Part 1 (ad free)

Episode description

In this episode, Andrew and Anna talk about comedy and what makes them laugh. They share stories about the types of humor they enjoy and discuss the differences in comedy across cultures, from British and American sitcoms to well-known comedians. Tune in to hear their thoughts and add some fun to your English learning!

Fun fact

The word "sitcom" stands for "situational comedy," a genre of TV that focuses on funny situations in everyday life. Popular sitcoms like Friends or The Office have become global sensations, but did you know the first-ever sitcom was Pinwright's Progress, a British show that aired in 1946?

Expressions included in the study guide

- To crack a joke
- Comedy gold
- Deadpan
- To push the envelope
- To rinse / to roast
- To take the mick out of



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Chatterbox 328. "What makes you laugh? Part one." Featuring Andrew and Anna. In today's episode, we're talking all about comedy. Comedy, yes, a universal part of life, but very, very different across cultures. So, Anna and I will share our personal stories about how humour has played a role in our lives. We'll discuss the kinds of comedies that we enjoy the most, and we'll also talk about the kind of comedy that we have encountered and enjoyed in our home countries and also abroad in our adopted home countries, we could say. We'll look at how comedy can connect us, can lighten up difficult moments or tough times, and highlight some of the cultural differences in what makes us laugh. OK, now it's time to bring Anna into the conversation and get started with today's topic. Here we go. Enjoy. Hello there, Anna, how's it going?

Anna: Hi Andrew, I'm very well, how are you?

Andrew: I'm doing well as well, Anna, and I've got to say I'm excited for this episode because we're going to talk about something that's a little bit lighter than our regular fare here on Chatterbox. You know, often we talk about trends or the economy or technology, and sometimes those go to dark places. But hopefully, fingers crossed, we keep things a little bit lighter for this episode because we're going to talk about laughter and comedy. And right before we started recording, Anna, you mentioned the dark comedy of the UK. So maybe it'll be like, I don't know, maybe it will be a little bit bleak as well, but that's something that we can get into. And yeah, I personally am a huge fan of comedy, which I mean is that saying anything? I think most people around the world probably enjoy laughing and enjoy being entertained in that way. But I'm very excited to hear your perspective as a Brit and also as a Brit abroad in Spain because I think comedy and laughing and what we find funny is very cultural and changes from place to place to place. So very stoked for this episode. And Anna, maybe I will kick off the discussion just by

asking you a general question, which is what usually makes you laugh? What do you find funny?

Anna: My goodness, that's a huge question.

Andrew: Yeah, not so easy to answer, right? Weirdly.

Anna: I'm the same as you, Andrew, and I'm sure you guys out there as well. I love to laugh. Laughing is one of the remedies for difficult situations. And in the UK, for example, we use comedy and humour all the time just to, I don't know, you're having a bad day, and somebody just **cracks a joke**. And, you know, it just lightens the mood. It lightens the situation. It's a really great way as well to break the ice if you're meeting people new. And I think there's so many things that make me laugh. Things that people do, silly things that people do, like jokes that my friends make. I'm thinking about one specific thing in particular. Recently, I was rewatching. This is how funny this series is. I was rewatching a series called "Fleabag."

Andrew: Oh, yeah, I know "Fleabag." I've seen that before.

Anna: And I'm not lying when I say that I was on my sofa, and I was laughing out loud. That series is absolute **comedy gold**. I just can't describe it. It was hilarious. I think I've watched it actually the third time I've watched it, and it was so funny. So, there's loads of series, and especially I have to, I'm really biased, Andrew, I'm afraid, but I think that British comedy is the best comedy in the world. I'm sorry, hands down, it is the best. Obviously completely biased because I'm British. But for me, there are so many amazing comedic British series that make me laugh so much. What about you, Andrew? What gets you going? What cracks you up?

Andrew: Yeah, well, I have to say that I don't disagree with you about British humour and British TV shows. There are some of my favourites of all time. I love "The Office," the

original UK version of "The Office." Probably "Peep Show" you're familiar with. I love "Peep Show." And one of the stars of the "Peep Show," David Mitchell, just cracks me up. He's just one of those guys that's not even really saying anything particularly funny or in a funny way, but it just cracks you up for some reason. He just makes me laugh. "Fleabag," like you said, was a really funny show as well. And I think all of these shows have something in common, which is there is a lot of like really heavy stuff that's talked about and discussed in them. But it's done in such a funny way. And yeah, maybe we could talk about that a little bit more because British humour is really unique in that way compared to North American humour, I think. Which is a little lighter, maybe not as serious, and probably more obvious, right? I think, for example, British humour is hidden a little bit and sometimes, you know, a joke could be really, really funny or a sentence could be really, really funny. But the way it's delivered is what we call **deadpan**, where the speaker is not being overly dramatic with their emotions or their body language to signal that they're actually telling a joke. And to me, that's super funny when that happens. Like this **deadpan** comedy is really funny. Could you speak to that a little bit more, Anna, and try to introduce us to what makes British humour unique?

Anna: Absolutely. I'm going to take a couple of examples from a comedian who I find really funny, but some people absolutely hate. He's a little bit controversial sometimes. And that's Ricky Gervais.

Andrew: Well, who isn't? As a comedian, all comedians are in some way controversial.

Anna: Exactly, because comedians are supposed to **push the envelope** a little bit. They're supposed to because comedy for me is like an art, OK? Comedians are artists in a way, standing up in front of people and trying to make people laugh. I can't imagine how difficult that is. So, for me, Ricky Gervais is hilarious. And for me, the epitome of some of the work that he did was when he did the Golden Globes, and he was absolutely **rinsing** the people in the audience. And it was so funny because you could see that their egos

were so big, some of them, that they just couldn't handle it, that he was **taking the mick out of** them. It was so good.

Andrew: Anna, maybe we could explain that a little bit. So, the Golden Globes is a big Hollywood awards show, right? I think for maybe TV and movies. And it usually happens just before the Academy Awards, the Oscars, which is the biggest, most famous award show in the USA. But the Golden Globes are really carefully watched by many people because usually the winner of the Golden Globe goes on to win the Oscar as well. So, it's well watched for that reason. But anyways, the host of the Golden Globes award show is usually a celebrity. And Ricky Gervais did it many times, maybe four or five, six times he was the host. And people loved the way that he hosted the Golden Globes because he **roasted** some of the people in the audience, like the audience of the Golden Globes. It's all these movie stars and they're usually sitting with the, you know, like the staff from the movie or TV show that they're representing. So, you'll see all the movie stars from one movie sitting together and Ricky Gervais would just **roast** them, you know, say some very funny comments about their personal lives, about their outfits, about their acting, about some comments that they made that year. Anything was fair game. And he did it in a way that others would never dare to do. It was like very risky behavior, like almost offensive things that he was saying. But I think because he was British, he got away with it in a way that maybe an American comedian couldn't get away with. So yeah, that's just a little of the backstory for people who don't know about that incident.

Anna: And going back to your previous question, Andrew, and I'm going to give an example with one of Ricky Gervais' series actually, because he's come up with a number of different series as well as his stand-up comedy. And I'm going to talk about a series here called "Derek." This series was really controversial because Derek, one of the main characters is a disabled man who lives in a residential home where old people live. And the series is about all the characters around that, the carer, her partner. For me, that series was really, really good. And the thing is, it does touch on these difficult topics about disability, about somebody who has learning difficulties. It also touches on alcoholism and

addiction, because one of the characters there is just, he's just horrendous. He's just this awful guy. But like you said, they do it in a light way. And actually, a lot of people were really angry with that series. And they said, you know, this series is **taking the mick out of** disabled people and people with learning difficulties. And actually, I think they missed the point there. Because I think what Ricky Gervais was trying to say with that series is actually, he was the best character in that series. He had the purest heart. He always looked out for people, and he always made sure that everybody was OK and helped. And I think that he was trying to make a point with that, like a serious point. So, coming back to what you said before, Andrew, yes, I think British comedy often is layered with these different things of comedy, but also sometimes it makes you think as well about life. And for me, for example, like, I have to say this, and this is a really controversial comment is, I hate, and I'm going to put hate in capital letters, anything like "Big Bang Theory" or...

Andrew: Oh, you've just triggered some of our audience, Anna.

Anna: I'm even gonna say, I know, I know, I know, this "Big Bang Theory," "Friends," like, I can't stand it. I cannot watch it. Like, it literally is painful for me to watch. I remember I had a housemate who used to just sit there and watch "Big Bang Theory." And I was like, I'd rather stick pins in my eyes. For me, that is just not funny whatsoever. So, it's so interesting how some people find some things hilarious. Other people are just like, "Oh my goodness, I couldn't think of anything worse." So that's also a really interesting thing about comedy is just so many different preferences about what makes people laugh and what doesn't. But for me, "Big Bang Theory" is the worst. I cannot, I just can't, I can't, I can't.

Andrew: I know that, to be honest, that style of sitcom is not my cup of tea either. I do like some American sitcoms. I love "Seinfeld." I love, there's a kind of a related show to "Seinfeld" called "Curb Your Enthusiasm" that I really love that has a lot of improv acting and improv comedy but is just really funny in general. And guys, if you haven't seen that, there are probably 10 or 11 seasons that you could jump into, and I'd recommend it. Anna, one of my favorite Ricky Gervais projects, just to go back to him for a second, was his

podcast, the Ricky Gervais podcast and radio show. I don't know if you ever listen to that, but he had, I think it was like the producer of the show was this guy named Karl Pilkington. And he used to have this segment on the radio show called "Monkey News" where Karl Pilkington would introduce this kind of crazy, crazy news story about a monkey. But it would be like the monkey learned how to play the piano or something. Like it's always a very unbelievable story about a monkey. But Karl Pilkington would be presenting it like he really believed that it happened. And Ricky Gervais would be poking fun at him the whole time. And I used to listen to that when I was high school and university student. I recently went back on YouTube and looked up the "Monkey News" archive. Like there's a two-hour clip of all of those segments and I was just howling. So, yeah, I don't know. It's pretty funny, but I'll have to check out "Derek." I'm not familiar with some of his more recent series and work, but those old classics are still funny to this day when you go back and revisit them, at least for me.

Anna: Oh, definitely. And without question, I mean, I'm sorry, guys, but if you think the American "Office" is better than the British "Office", I'm sorry, we can't, we can't talk. There's no way that we can continue. All right. Because the British "Office" is **comedy gold**. I do like the American "Office". I'm not saying it's bad, but the British "Office" is the original. So, if you want the original "Office", you have to go back.

Andrew: So, this episode ended up going a little bit longer than we initially expected, and instead of giving you one big, massive episode to listen to, we've decided to split it into two parts. So, today's episode's a little bit on the shorter side, but there's another 20 to 30 minutes of content that we will play for you in part two. So, I gotta say a big thanks to my cohost, Anna, for joining me today to talk about comedy, and I hope that this maybe gave you some new insights to the way that English speaking people think about comedy, and maybe even introduced you to some new TV shows that you can check out in your free time. Be sure to check out part two next week, where we'll keep talking about how comedy can vary around the world. It should be really interesting, so don't miss it. That brings us to the end of this lesson. Talk to you next time bye.

Detailed Explanations

To crack a joke

Idiom

The idiomatic verb "**to crack a joke**" means to tell a joke or say something funny to make people laugh. In the episode, Anna talks about how humour is a vital part of life and that people often **crack jokes** to make bad situations feel better or to break the ice when meeting new people.

When you say someone **cracks a joke**, it means they are making a funny comment to cheer others up or entertain them. For example, if you're in a meeting that feels too serious, someone might **crack a joke** to help everyone relax. You might also say, "Dave tends **to crack jokes** when he feels uncomfortable." This means Dave uses humour to get through awkward situations.

You can remember the verb **to crack a joke** by thinking about breaking something open, like cracking an egg. Just like cracking an egg reveals something inside, **cracking a joke** reveals the humour in a situation.

The word "crack" in this expression is used in other humour-related terms. Someone who is rarely serious and always **cracking witty jokes** can be called a "wisecrack." Another verb for **cracking jokes** is "cracking wise," though this is not heard as often as the noun "wisecrack." When you find a joke really funny, you can say that it "cracks you up," as in, "That comedian always cracks me up!"

Here are a few more examples with **to crack a joke**:

Rebecca: Your dad is so funny. Whenever I come over, it seems like he's just **cracking jokes** all the time.

Robert: Yeah, he's always like that. He just loves to make people laugh. Actually, it can get a little irritating, sometimes!

Carlos: I'm feeling so nervous about this presentation.

Monica: Don't worry. Just **crack a joke** at the beginning to loosen everyone up. It always works for me.

Carlos: That's actually a great idea. I'll give it a try.

Comedy gold

Expression

The expression **comedy gold** means something that is extremely funny or the highest quality of comedy. During the episode, Anna describes the TV series Fleabag and the British version of The Office as "**comedy gold**," meaning they are so funny and well-done that she can't stop laughing, even after watching them many times.

Comedy gold is used when a show, movie, or joke is so great that it stands out as some of the best comedy around. When you say something is **comedy gold**, it means that the comedy is perfect and makes people laugh a lot. For example, if you watch a movie and can't stop laughing because it's so funny, you might call it "**comedy gold**." Another example could be, "That new episode was **comedy gold**! I was laughing out loud the whole time."

This expression combines the word "comedy" (which means funny entertainment) and "gold" (which is often used to describe something valuable or of high quality). Just like gold is precious and valuable, **comedy gold** refers to humour that is considered precious and very enjoyable. Think of gold as something valuable and rare, like finding a treasure. So, when you call something **comedy gold**, it's like saying it's a treasure of comedy—very funny and special.

This usage of "gold" is sometimes seen in other contexts, like "marketing gold" or "content gold," and is similarly used to describe something highly valuable, effective, or successful in these fields of marketing or content production. However, **comedy gold** is a more common expression and people frequently refer to exceptionally funny moments, shows, or jokes as "gold."

Be careful – don't use **comedy gold** for something that is only mildly funny. It should be reserved for things that are exceptionally funny.

Here are a few more examples with **comedy gold**:

Kira: How was the stand-up show last night?

Aaron: It was amazing! The comedian's impressions were pure **comedy gold**.

David: I just watched The Office again. It never gets old.

Michaela: I know, right? I like both the American and the British versions, but the British one is **comedy gold**. Every episode cracks me up.

Deadpan Adjective

Deadpan refers to a style of humour where someone delivers a joke or funny comment in a serious way, without showing any emotion on their face or in their voice. In the episode, Andrew talks about British humour often being "**deadpan**," where comedians make people laugh without showing that they are trying to be funny. Instead of using big gestures or laughing at their own jokes, they keep a straight face and speak in a calm, serious tone, which can make the joke even funnier.

For example, if a person says something ridiculous but keeps a straight face, this **deadpan** delivery can make the comment even more humorous because the person doesn't act like they just said something funny. This kind of humour is common in British comedies, where jokes are often hidden in everyday speech and facial expressions don't give away the punchline.

The expression comes from the idea of a "dead" or emotionless face, combined with "pan," which is an outdated slang term for face. Together, it means keeping your face still or blank while delivering a joke.

Similar expressions include "dry humour" or "straight-faced." You might say, "She has such dry humour that sometimes I don't even realize she's joking," or "He told the joke with a completely straight face and it was hilarious."

Don't confuse **deadpan** with "boring" or "unfunny" just because it has the word "dead" in it. Someone using **deadpan** humour is intentionally keeping a straight face to make the joke funnier. Also, don't use **deadpan** for a joke that is very energetic or exaggerated, since the **deadpan** style of humour is all about subtlety and seriousness. For example, you would NOT say, "That loud, silly performance was **deadpan**," because **deadpan** humour is calm and understated.

Here are a couple more examples with **deadpan**:

Jennifer: Did you notice how Sarah made that joke about the broken printer during the meeting? No one even laughed.

Jonathan: I think that's because her humour is so **deadpan**. She said it with such a serious expression, people probably didn't realize she was joking.

Joey: Jake's humour is hard to read sometimes. He's so **deadpan** about everything.

Emily: Yeah, I don't know how he can keep a straight face like that!

To push the envelope Idiom

In the episode, Anna talks about comedians like Ricky Gervais who "**push the envelope**" by doing things that might be a bit controversial or risky, but that's part of their job as comedians. The expression "**to push the envelope**" means to go beyond normal limits or expectations, especially in a creative or challenging way. This means that comedians who **push the envelope** challenge what is acceptable in comedy, often making people think or react in new ways.

When someone "**pushes the envelope**," it means they are trying to do something new or daring that goes beyond what is normally done. For example, a director who creates a movie with a very unusual or controversial theme might be said to be **pushing the envelope** because they are challenging the normal standards in filmmaking. Similarly, you might say, "This new architectural design really **pushes the envelope**—it's unlike anything we've seen before."

The phrase **push the envelope** comes from aviation, where "envelope" referred to the limits of an aircraft's performance. To "**push the envelope**" in this context meant to test the aircraft's limits by flying faster or higher than usual. Over time, the expression started to be used in other fields to mean challenging the usual limits or boundaries.

Similar expressions include "break new ground," "think outside the box," and "test the limits." You might say, "That artist is always breaking new ground with their work," or "He really thinks outside the box with his ideas."

Don't use "**push the envelope**" for everyday or small actions. It's meant for situations where someone is trying something bold or beyond the usual limits. For example, you would NOT say, "I'm **pushing the envelope** by trying a new recipe for dinner." Instead, you might use it for bigger actions, like creating a new invention or introducing a groundbreaking idea.

Here are a couple more examples with **to push the envelope**:

Anita: The coach's strategy in the last game was risky.

Zachary: He likes **to push the envelope** with his tactics. It keeps the other teams guessing.

Mateo: That band's new album is way more experimental than their previous ones.

Fiona: Isn't it? I love how they're trying out new things and **pushing the envelope**.

To rinse / to roast

Verb

The expressions "**to rinse**" (UK) and "**to roast**" (US) both mean to make fun of someone in a harsh but usually funny way. In the episode, Anna says Ricky Gervais was "**rinsing**" the people at the Golden Globes, meaning he was making jokes about them and teasing their egos and behaviors. Andrew agrees that his performance felt like a big "**roast**" of the rich and famous.

When you say someone is "**rinsing**" or "**roasting**" someone, it means they are making fun of them, often with sharp or sarcastic jokes. This is usually done in a lighthearted or comedic way, although it can sometimes be a little harsh. For example, a comedian might "**roast**" a celebrity by teasing them about their fashion choices or past actions in front of an audience.

The term "**rinse**" is more popular in the UK, but "**roast**" is more commonly heard in the US. In the UK, people might say, "He **rinsed** her during the show," while in the US, they would say, "He **roasted** her during the show." Both expressions mean the same thing: making fun of someone with sharp humour.

To remember "**roast**," think about cooking something over heat. Just like roasting food, "roasting" someone means they're under pressure or "heat" from funny insults. For "**rinse**," imagine rinsing dirt off something—when you "**rinse**" someone, you are exposing their weaknesses in a playful way.

Similar expressions include "to burn" (US) or "to make fun of." You might say, "She really got burned by his joke" or "He made fun of his friend for wearing that outfit."

Here are a couple more examples with **rinse / roast**:

Kendrick: Did you watch the celebrity **roast** on TV last night?

Sasha: Yeah, they really **roasted** her! I didn't know she could take a joke so well.

Kendrick: It was brutal, but hilarious at the same time.

Lois: Why did everyone laugh when James walked in?

Bart: We've been **rinsing** him all day for being late to a meeting this morning. He's been taking it in good humour, though.

Lois: That's classic James!

To take the mick out of Idiom

Anna explains that some viewers were offended by the Ricky Gervais series “Derek” because they thought he was **taking the mick out of** disabled people, but she believes that these viewers didn’t understand the point of the show.

The expression **to take the mick out of** or **to take the mickey out of** something or someone means to make fun of or tease someone in a playful or mocking way. For example, if a friend wears a strange-looking hat, people might **take the mick out of** them by joking about how funny they look. The teasing is usually good-natured, but it’s important to make sure the person being teased is okay with it.

The verb **take the mick out of** is commonly used in the UK in casual conversations when someone is mocking or playfully criticizing another person. It is similar to saying “making fun of” or “teasing” in American English. For example, you might hear someone say, “He’s been **taking the mick out of me** all day for my new shoes!”

Taking the mick out of someone is similar **roasting** or **rinsing** someone, but it’s not as intense. One or two playful jokes about someone’s fashion choice, for example, could be considered **taking the mick**, but if the teasing becomes more exaggerated, continuous, or biting, it starts to become **roasting** or **rinsing**.

Another very similar expression which is common across the UK is “taking the piss.” You can use this in the same way as “**taking the mick**.” However, since the word “piss” is mildly vulgar and rude, it would be best to avoid using this expression in formal or business settings.

Here are a couple more examples with **to take the mick out of**:

Hannah: Nice jacket, Ben. Did you borrow that from your granddad?

Ben: Oh, come on! You’re just **taking the mick** now. It’s vintage, alright?

Hannah: Sure, ‘vintage.’ Keep telling yourself that!

Nina: You’ve been lifting those same weights for months, Simon. Are you actually getting any stronger?

Simon: Oh, don’t start **taking the mick out of** me now. I’ve been making progress, slow and steady!

Expression Quiz

1. If someone says, "Her deadpan humour is brilliant," what do they mean?

- a) She tells jokes with lots of emotion.
- b) She tells jokes in a serious, emotionless way.
- c) She makes jokes that are easy to understand.
- d) She only tells jokes about death.

2. If a comedian "roasts" someone during a show, what are they doing?

- a) Making fun of them in a funny but harsh way.
- b) Asking them to leave the show.
- c) Ignoring them.
- d) Complimenting them.

3. Which of the following would be an example of "pushing the envelope"?

- a) Copying someone else's homework.
- b) Trying to fix a broken computer the same way it was fixed before.
- c) Finishing a group project.
- d) Creating a new type of art that no one has seen before.

4. In which situation would it be appropriate to "take the mick out of someone"?

- a) Making fun of a friend's funny dance moves at a party.
- b) Criticizing someone for a serious mistake at work.
- c) Giving a formal speech at a wedding.
- d) Complimenting a colleague's great work.

5. True or False: "Comedy gold" refers to something extremely funny or of very high comedic value.

- a) True
- b) False

Listening Comprehension Quiz

6. According to Anna, what is a common use of humour in the UK?
7. What British TV series does Anna say she was watching again because it was so funny?
8. What does Andrew say about the delivery of British humour?
9. Why does Andrew say people enjoyed Ricky Gervais hosting the Golden Globes?
10. How does Anna feel about shows like The Big Bang Theory and Friends?

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Who is the funniest person you know? Why are they so funny? What kinds of **jokes do they crack**?
2. What's your favorite comedian, comedy series or comedy movie? Why do you think it's **comedy gold**?
3. In the episode, Anna talks about her dislike for shows like The Big Bang Theory and Friends. What are some shows, comedians, or styles of humour that you do NOT find funny?
4. Many comedians, including Ricky Gervais, are known for **pushing the envelope** with their comedy. What are your thoughts on comedians who take risks with their humour? Are there lines that shouldn't be crossed?
5. In the episode, Andrew and Anna talk about cultural differences in humour. How do you think humour varies across different cultures?

Quiz Answers

1.b 2.a 3.d 4.a 5.a

6. To lighten the mood during bad days.

7. Fleabag

8. It is often hidden and delivered in a deadpan style.

9. He roasted the celebrities in the audience with funny, risky comments.

10. She finds them painful to watch and not funny at all.

Episode credits

Hosts: Andrew Bates and Anna Connelly

Music: *Something Elated by Broke for Free*

Episode preparation/research: Andrew Bates

Audio editor: Marshall Vaillancourt

Transcriptionist: Heather Bates

Study guide writer: Indiana Brown

English editor: Alina Morozova

Operations: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima

Image: Savannah Dematteo (pexels.com)