
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

What makes us laugh?

The logo for BBC Learning English, featuring the letters 'BBC' in a white box above the words 'LEARNING ENGLISH' in white text on a teal background.

NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Alice

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Alice...

Neil

... and I'm Neil. OK Alice, I've got something for you here... a question...

Alice

Yeah.

Neil

Ready? What is the Mexican version of One Direction?

Alice

Um... No idea.

Neil

Juan Direction. Get it?

Alice

Very good...

Neil

Juan Direction... You know?

Alice

Yes, yes, I get it.

Neil

Never mind. Can you guess what the subject of today's show is instead?

Alice

Is it bad jokes?

Neil

Come on! That was a good little gag! Yes. The subject of today's show is... what makes us laugh. And in this context, to **get something**, for example a **gag** – or joke, means to understand it. We all like to laugh – well not you apparently – but most of us do! It's good for our health, it reduces stress and releases feel-good hormones in the body.

Alice

OK, thank you, Neil. But how about answering today's quiz question? Which Greek word means the study of laughter and its effects on the body? Is it...

- a) risology?
- b) gelotology?
- or c) comology?

Neil

That's difficult and I'm going to say c) comology because it's got the word 'comedy' in it, you see?

Alice

Oh, very good. OK. Well, we'll find out later if you're right. Now, did you know, we rarely laugh when we're on our own? Laughter is a social thing that we generally like to share with other people.

Neil

Really? I laugh when I'm watching cartoons on my own – don't you, Alice?

Alice

No, Neil, I don't. Anyway, some researchers believe that the purpose of laughter is related to the way we bond with each other. And the more we laugh, the more we bond as a group.

Neil

Interesting idea. It could explain why **stand-up comedy** – where a comedian performs in front of and talks directly to their audience – is very popular entertainment. But what does it take to keep your audience laughing? Let's listen to Steve Byrne, a successful US comedian talking about this.

INSERT

Steve Byrne, comedian

The one single thing an aspiring comedian should do is to write, write, write and talk about the things that make them laugh. Selfishness – time to be selfish – time to be a little narcissistic. What is it that makes you laugh? Because that will get you closer to finding your voice. Because ultimately that's why people come see you.

Neil

So comedians need to be selfish and narcissistic – that sounds pretty negative!

Alice

Yes, it does. **Narcissistic** means being too interested in yourself – for example your appearance or other personal qualities. And **aspiring** means wanting to be successful in your chosen career.

Neil

And what does Steve mean when he says comedians need to find their voice?

Alice

Well, he means they need to talk about what they think in a way that's **unique** – meaning unusual or special – to them.

Neil

OK. Let's listen to Steve again talking about turning 40 and what he finds funny about that.

INSERT

Steve Byrne, comedian

When you turn 40 you will hear this in your life and hopefully you'll hear this the rest of your life. 'You look good for 40. You look good for 52. You look great for 63.' You never hear that when you're young. You never hear: 'You look good for 19.'

You think there's going to be some magic potion – some magic shortcut to it all. It's writing and getting up on stage. It takes a lot of perseverance and it's such a competitive occupation. You know, you've just got to outwork everybody.

Neil

Well, we heard Steve making his audience laugh there. And by the way, Alice, you look fantastic for 40.

Alice

That's not funny, Neil. I'm only 39 and you know it. Anyway, moving on, Steve says there's no magic potion or shortcut to success. You have to work hard – it doesn't happen by itself. And **perseverance** means to keep on trying to achieve something even when it's difficult.

Neil

He says you have to **outwork** everybody – which means to work harder than everybody else. Steve certainly doesn't make comedy sound much fun, does he?

Alice

No. In fact some people say there's a connection between depression and comedy – that comedians can be introverted and depressive.

Neil

Is that right? **Introverts** are generally quiet people who are more interested in their own thoughts and feelings than in spending time with other people.

Alice

Yes, you'd think that most comedians would be **extroverts** – people who are lively and enjoy the company of others. OK I think it's time for the answer to our quiz question, Neil. I asked: Which Greek word means the study of laughter and its effects on the body? Is it...
a) risology?
b) gelotology?
or c) comology?

Neil

Yes. I said c) comology, which I think I'm beginning to regret now.

Alice

Yes, well, indeed. Sorry, I'm afraid that's the wrong answer. It's actually b) gelotology – which comes from the Greek word, *gelos*, meaning laughter.

Neil

OK. You can stop sniggering now, Alice and just tell us today's words once again?

Alice

Alright then. Here they are:
get something (e.g. a joke)
gag
stand-up comedy
narcissistic
aspiring
unique
perseverance
outwork
introverts
extroverts

Neil

Well, that just about brings us to the end of today's 6 Minute English.

Alice

See you next time.

Both

Bye.

Vocabulary

get something (idiomatic)

understand

gag

joke or funny story

stand-up comedy

a type of comedy where a comedian performs in front of and talks directly to their audience

narcissistic

being too interested in yourself – for example your appearance or other personal qualities

aspiring

wanting to be successful in your chosen career

unique

unusual or special

perseverance

to keep on trying to achieve something even when it's difficult

outwork

work harder than everybody else

introverts

people who are generally quiet and more interested in their own thoughts and feelings than in spending time with other people

extroverts

people who are generally lively, outgoing, and enjoy the company of others