

Travel Catastrophes For Fun and Profit

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TRAVEL CATASTROPHES FOR FUN AND PROFIT

With Dave Fox

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Humor Writing Basics: Things Go Wrong

- Look for the conflict.
- Exaggerate.
- Play with your words.
 - Be specific.
 - Some words are funnier than others.

Travel Basics: Telling the Tale

The “Hero Up a Tree” Formula

- Get your hero up a tree.
- Throw rocks at your hero.
- Get your hero down.

Beginnings

- Get into the action (the conflict or confusion) immediately. *“In medias res.”*
- Kill your backstory before it kills your story. If it takes you four paragraphs before you’re at the funny part, throw out those four paragraphs.

Middles

- Build conflict and tension throughout your story and the humor will build with it.
- When possible, save your funniest anecdotes or situations for later in the tale.
- Scrap extraneous details that aren’t relevant to the story you are telling. If something needs to be there to move the action forward, but it isn’t funny, get through it as concisely and quickly as possible.

Endings

- Is there a lesson (or, with humor, a fake lesson) you’ve learned?
- Is there a natural place to “fade out” the action, a “life goes on” moment?
- Callbacks: Tie your final thought back to something near the beginning of the tale.

Editing Your Stories

- Comb through, sentence by sentence. Tighten your words and cut the flab.
- Shorter phrases will move your stories forward more effectively. Conduct a search-and-destroy mission on all unnecessary words, phrases, details, etc.
- Don't drown your punch lines. Save the funniest element for last – the last phrase in the paragraph, the last word in the sentence, etc.
- Make several editing passes. When you find weak spots, avoid the urge to gloss over them. Are there places you can exaggerate more? Can you concoct more specific examples, find funnier words, etc.?

Final Thoughts

- If you want to write travel humor, embrace the moments when things don't go as planned. Things might seem dismal in the moment, but chaos breeds comedy. Travel knowing that if a journey goes entirely smoothly, it's not really an adventure.
- When your journeys are unraveling, take mental notes and journal about your experiences as soon as possible.
- Don't just write when you travel. Practice at home in a journal or blog. Network with other writers. Join groups. Take classes. Solicit and *embrace* constructive criticism. When someone gives you feedback you disagree with, that's okay. Not all feedback is correct or helpful. However... be careful not to blow off these critiques too quickly. Often, our writers' egos (we all have them) are resistant to any suggestions for change. So when you receive well-intended suggestions, sit with them for a little while. Test them out and see what happens to your writing.
- Writing and humor are not magical "gifts" a few lucky people are born with. They are skills anyone can learn and master with practice. Just like learning to play an instrument, a sport, a foreign language, or another kind of art, writing and humor skills don't come instantly. The concept of natural talent is dreadfully overrated. If you want to be a great humor writer, you can. It just has to be important enough to you that you really want to work at it.

HOW TO WRITE TRAVEL HUMOR

THE DYSFUNCTIONALLY PERFECT MARRIAGE OF TWO GENRES

By Dave Fox

“When you travel, things go wrong.” That’s been my number one travel motto for years. It might not sound like uplifting advice, but embracing this reality helps you roll with and recover from the mini-disasters inevitable on every journey. For humor writers, there’s an added bonus. When things go wrong, we get stories!

Years ago, when I decided to pursue professional humor writing, I took a methodical, geeky approach to studying comedic structure. I read books. I took classes. In one workshop, taught by Seattle-based humor consultant Bill Stainton, Bill offered this simple definition: “Comedy happens when something goes wrong.” When he shared his explanation, it so closely echoed my own travel philosophy. I realized then that travel writing and humor writing are two genres that fit together perfectly – like chocolate and peanut butter in a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, but with fewer calories.

Travel is full of confusions, incongruities, and conflict. Whether it’s lost luggage, cultural misunderstandings, or a herd of wildebeest stampeding through your hotel room, your most frustrating moments on the road often make for your most hilarious travel tales later.

Keeping a [travel journal](#) as you go is critical in order to capture the details. Don’t try to create your best writing in your travel diaries. You don’t have enough time during an exciting vacation. Instead, splash as many thoughts onto your pages as quickly as possible. Those scribbled notes will jar your memories when you’re back at home, crafting more polished travel tales. In addition to a journal, always carry a pocket-sized notebook. Jot quick thoughts – story ideas, funny musings, names of characters or locations that might appear in your stories, and so on.

When it’s time to polish your tales, dive right in. Many aspiring travel writers make the mistake of front-loading their stories with extraneous information. You must hook your readers in the first 30 to 40 words. If not, they’ll quit reading. Get right into the action. You can always backtrack and fill in details later.

Here’s an example of a mediocre lead:

It all began one morning when I stepped out of the shower. The next thing I knew, I saw a snake in my bed.

Here’s a better lead:

The snake poked his head out from under my pillow as if the bed belonged to him. I froze, dripping and naked, wishing I had more than a towel to defend myself.

Don't be shy about embellishing. Stretch things with colorful examples. "I can't swim very well," might be needed information in a story about falling off a boat, but "I swim with the prowess of a Golden Retriever" is a funnier way to say it. In one story, in which I wrote about trying to put on a tie, my rough draft said, "I hate tying ties." Not funny. I changed it to, "It took me six attempts before I had my tie on." Still not funny. In my final draft, I wrote, "After 37 attempts, I managed to origami myself into a tie." Better. Coming up with lines like this takes time. It's a trial-and-error process. Sit with your non-funny sentences and brainstorm creative ways to write them.

Keep your writing tight. Don't say in 900 words what you can say in 600. Concise writing makes your stories easier to read. The humor punches through more strongly. Here are some examples of flabby versus tight writing:

Flabby: The building was surrounded by a tall fence that was made out of iron.

Tight: A tall iron fence surrounded the building.

Flabby: The shark went swimming through the water at breakneck speed.

Tight: The shark plowed through the water.

At times, you'll choose longer phrasing to add character or a more comedic voice. That's fine, but make every word count. Comb through, sentence by sentence, and see if there are phrases you can shorten or words you can eliminate.

When writing about unfamiliar cultures, be careful how you frame the things that go wrong. Ripping into a place you are unfamiliar with can make you sound like a culturally insensitive jerk. If you turn things around, however, and make your own confusion the source of the problem, your humble (or overblown) self-deprecation will get readers on your side.

When we travel to new places, confusion is natural – and wonderful if we accept it as part of the thrill that comes with being foreign. So when you venture to new places, expect and embrace that confusion. Even if things seem horrible in the moment, know you'll have a great story later. My worst travel experience ever involved a hospital stay in Turkey. An evil salad did terrible things to my insides, to the extent I was barely conscious and afraid for my life. Reliving the experience years later when I wrote my travel humor book, [Getting Lost: Mishaps of an Accidental Nomad](#), was painful. I wondered how I could find humor in those moments. But after a lot of work, it ended up being one of my favorite chapters.

As a travel humorist, I've come to see things going wrong as things going right. The crazy and chaotic moments in my journeys are the fodder I need to write my best travel humor tales. So when things go haywire on your own trips, don't get frustrated. Get writing! Jot it in your journal. Then when time allows, polish those rough-draft journal entries into crazy adventures that will make your readers cackle.

Sleepless in Southern Africa

By Dave Fox

It's 4:23 a.m., and all is quiet in the Okavango Delta.

Wait, no. That's not right. Let's start over.

It's 4:23 a.m. in the Okavango Delta, and I can't sleep because the birds are antagonizing me. I don't know what their problem is. Sure, I've come to Botswana to check out the wildlife, but it's too early for such boisterous chirping.

You'd think that in rural Africa, if an animal was going to disturb me with loud noises, it would be a big animal like a roaring lion or a trumpeting elephant. But no. It's the birds. Some warble. Some squawk. Some chatter. Some cluck. One species sounds like a frog. Another sounds like that guy behind you in the supermarket line who you want to strangle because he will not stop whistling the same six notes, over and over. Then there's the Blacksmith Lapwing, so named because its call resembles a blacksmith's hammer striking an anvil. I don't know if you've ever tried to sleep while someone banged on an anvil outside your bedroom, but it's not a restful experience.

The most distinct sounding bird here is the Cape Turtle Dove. Its guttural warble has a constant rhythm – short squawk, long squawk, short squawk, like the Morse Code letter "R." Some people suggest the bird is saying "*Bot-swaaa-na. Bot-swaaa-na.*" Others claim it's saying, "Drink lager. Drink lager."

Really, bird? It's 4:23 in the morning. The bars are closed. Leave me alone.

I lie awake, wishing my safari tent had better sound-proofing. When I finally start to doze, a new sound rips through my slumber. "*Whoooo!*" it echoes through the trees, and I think, "Great. Now I'm being haunted by a ghost-bird." But later I find out it was not a bird. Or a ghost. It was a hyena. Apparently, hyenas do not always laugh. Sometimes they haunt. I assume this is a scare tactic to shut the birds up, but it's useless.

In daylight, the sounds of the Okavango Delta change. The bigger animals make their voices heard. Elephants and lions trumpet and roar. Baboons in trees hoot out warning calls. Hippos snort through gaping mouths. At civilized hours, I like hearing the animals.

After several days, our safari moves to the Kalahari Desert where I discover my favorite beast of all – the wildebeest. Wildebeest sound a little like Muppets.

"*Murp!*" they say, in a higher pitched tone than one would expect from an animal four times one's weight. Imagine a cow, with a stuffy nose and a large mouthful of lasagna lodged in its esophagus, attempting to moo. That is the sound of the wildebeest.

On one night, a large herd of wildebeest gathers at a watering hole near our safari lodge. They jostle for position at salt licks, lunging at each other to assert their dominance. But seriously, how much dominance can a creature assert when all it has to say is, “*Murp?*”

In the Kalahari, I do not sleep in a tent. Here, I have a small bungalow with indoor plumbing, an electric fan, and a thatched roof over my head. With walls to muffle the early morning bird sounds, it’s a more peaceful slumber, until...

“Phwt phwt phwt phwt.”

The sound is above me, flapping around inside my room. It’s not a bird. It’s a bat. It’s 3:30 a.m., and the bat darts through my flashlight’s beam just long enough to startle me. Then it disappears into the rafters, never to be seen again. But I hear it – every time I roll over in bed. It keeps me awake the rest of the night.

Bats are harmless to humans. That’s what Bill tells me the next morning. Bill and I are working together on this safari. He’s our group’s wildlife specialist. I’m teaching travel writing classes along the way. When it comes to animal behavior, I normally trust Bill’s knowledge, but when I have not had a good night’s rest in five days, do not tell me that a bat flapping above my head all night, depriving me of sleep, is not in some way hazardous to at least my mental health.

“You’ve walked within 20 feet of an eland,” Bill says. This one-ton species of antelope, he explains, would stomp on my head if it felt threatened. “And you’re afraid of a little bat?”

But I’m not so much *afraid* of the bat as I am annoyed. To illustrate this point, I tiptoe behind Bill while he’s eating. I hiss in his ear, “*Phwt phwt phwt phwt.*” This is effective. The next time someone tells you bats are beautiful creatures that we should embrace, hiss that noise repeatedly in their ear when they’re not expecting it. They might punch you, but they’ll get your point.

After two weeks in Botswana, however, I grow so used to the animal sounds, I hardly notice them. They become soothing white noise, like the whirr of my electric heater at home.

When I finally return to my apartment in Seattle, I miss the calls of Blacksmith Lapwings and Cape Turtle Doves. I long for a hyena to haunt me in my dreams, or a herd of murmuring wildebeest to gather outside my bedroom at night. I remember my first pre-dawn morning in the Okavango Delta, when all I wanted was for the birds to shut their beaks and let me snooze. Now, I miss the symphony of rural Africa. Home in Seattle, the big city seems too quiet.

Tackling Lucy

By Dave Fox

The sheep was on a mission. She was trotting quickly, almost running, in the direction of downtown Dingle with a confident stride and a mischievous glint in her eyes.

There were lots of sheep in Ireland. Too many to count. But I could tell this one was different. This sheep was a rebel.

I had just stepped out my bed-and-breakfast on my way to interview a pub owner about Dingle's folk music scene. It was an innocent enough goal: Take a few notes, then go chat up a few more sources, maybe slurp down a pint of Guinness, and if I was lucky, squeeze in a hike before the evening's music sessions revved up. But that's one of the funny things about life: you never know when a runaway sheep is going to cross your path and change everything.

"Lucy!" a voice shouted from up the road. It was a farmer. A very pissed off farmer with a knack for profanity. Granted, most Irish men have a knack for profanity, but this guy was exceptional. "Lucy, yeh get the fook back hare noow!"

I looked up the hill at the farmer, then down the hill at Lucy the Sheep, who was headed somewhere very important. Lucy's trot was quickening. She was going to have to move faster if she was going to make it to... the pub? The hair salon? It was hard to tell where she was off to, but it was clearly someplace important.

"Lucy!" the farmer shouted again. "Come the fook back hare!" I wondered why he was yelling at Lucy. Did he think she was suddenly going to turn obedient?

"Oh? Come back there? Is that what you want me to do? Oh. Okay. *Baah!*"

No. That wasn't going to happen. Lucy was a rebel. She knew it. I knew it. The farmer looked silly telling her what to do. But people behave strangely when they're losing control of a situation. They panic and blame whoever is around them for their crisis.

Suddenly, the farmer realized demanding anything of a renegade sheep was futile. He stopped yelling at Lucy. He turned to the only other creature in the vicinity who could be yelled at: me.

"Stop her!" he commanded.

Asking me to help stop Lucy was even less logical than telling Lucy to stop herself. I was raised in the suburbs. My only experience with sheep involved a sweater or two. I'm confident the farmer would not have asked me to stop Lucy had there been any other human being on the street. I was his only hope, but he didn't know who he was talking to. Lucy slowed down and turned around. We sized each other up. She was heavier and smellier than me. She also had more confidence. Confidence is important in psyching out your opponent. Lucy stopped and glared at me.

"I can kick your ass," said the expression in her eyes.

Getting your ass kicked is no fun under any circumstance. Getting your ass kicked by a sheep seemed especially degrading.

"Stop her for fook's sake!" the farmer shouted more urgently. I blinked back at him. I didn't want to stop Lucy. Lucy would probably hurt me. Besides, I was kind of rooting for her.

The farmer was running, panting for breath. He was gaining on Lucy. I watched as he lumbered past me. Lucy dodged him as he came within grabbing distance.

The farmer looked back up the road at me. I couldn't tell if he was more pissed at the sheep or me. I wasn't being helpful.

"I'm from the suburbs," I wanted to explain. "The *American* suburbs. We don't have sheep. We have dogs and cats. I was attacked by a dog when I was six. It was traumatic. I don't want to be attacked by a sheep."

But there was no time for conversation. We had a crisis. I was in Ireland, where a real man wouldn't let a sheep get away. I was not making an impressive showing.

The farmer lunged at Lucy again, which was when Lucy seemed to figure out the dynamic between the three of us. Her stupid owner was angry and determined to apprehend her. The stupid tourist up the road was scared and determined to avoid her. Lucy's decision was a no-brainer. Elude the stupid farmer and charge the stupid tourist.

So she did. She reversed her downhill trot, running more laboriously up the road now, straight toward me.

"Stop her!" the farmer barked at me again.

I dove out of Lucy's way.

Lucy ran behind a house.

"She's behind the house!" the farmer shouted at me.

"Yes," I wanted to say. "I can see that. Thank you. Have a nice day." Instead, I stood there, frozen.

"I'll stay on the road," the farmer shouted. "You go corner her behind the house!"

I blinked. What was this guy's problem? I didn't like the way he ordered me around. He stood on the road like a drill sergeant, giving commands as if he had rehearsed them for some sort of renegade sheep preparedness drill. I was starting to side with Lucy. The farmer was a jerk. If I were cooped up on his farm, I'd run away too. But caught in the adrenaline of the moment, I felt

a sense of responsibility. Pathetic as his plan was, the man was counting on me to help capture his sheep.

I followed Lucy behind the house. A narrow path, maybe three feet wide, ran behind the building. It was flanked by a five-foot cement wall. The path dead-ended at the far side of the house. Lucy was in the corner now. She looked at back at me, and for the first time, I saw fear in her eyes.

"Chase her around the other side!" the farmer was yelling, his voice now muffled by the building between us. "I'll catch her when she comes out!" But I couldn't chase Lucy. The path didn't go around to the other side of the house. Without intending to, I had trapped her.

"Where is she?" the voice from the other side of the house inquired. "Chase her over here for fook's sake!" He couldn't see me, in a standoff with his sheep. I wanted to sneak Lucy out of there somehow. But the sheep and I did not speak the same language, and the farmer was getting impatient.

Lucy looked sad. And scared. And in a debate with herself: fight or flight?

For me, the answer was clear: If she wanted to get out of there, the smart thing would be to charge me, head down, eyes ablaze, baahing wildly as she came toward me. I was more afraid of Lucy than she was of me. But apparently she didn't figure that out, because the next thing she decided to try was to scale the cement wall.

For a sheep her size to jump over a wall this tall would be impossible, unless she happened to be Lucy the Bionic Sheep. She was not. She jumped up against the wall, hooves a-flying, trying to escape. She was clumsy. She slipped back down on the concrete and made a second attempt.

I couldn't let her do this. She was starting to panic, and I worried she would wound herself in her desperation.

"She's over here," I shouted to the farmer. He needed to apprehend Lucy before she hurt herself.

"Well bring her over here then!" he yelled.

I was tired of his orders. "Now look here, you fooking fook," I wanted to tell him. "First of all, she's your fooking sheep, not mine, so quit telling me what to do. Secondly, maybe if you weren't such a fooking arse, your fooking sheep wouldn't try to fooking escape."

If he wasn't going to come over here to capture Lucy, I was going to let Lucy go.

I stepped aside. "Go, Lucy!" I whispered. "Run away! Off to the fields! Go quietly! Go now! There's no time for goodbyes. If I see you in the pub later, you can buy me a pint."

Lucy looked at me inquisitively for a moment. Then, she understood.

"*Baah*," she whispered.

She started trotting toward me, just fast enough to make it clear that if I tried anything funny, she would still kick my ass. I stepped aside.

But then, Lucy made a horrible tactical error. Rather than tiptoeing off to the field, she ran around to the front of the house. She started down the hill — to right where the farmer was standing. I ran out to watch. The farmer glared at me.

"Ummm... there she is!" I shouted. "Get her!"

And he did. He pounced on Lucy, who was tired by now. He grabbed her by the ears. She bucked a couple of times, then surrendered to his grip.

"Come on, Lucy," the farmer said.

His tone was different now. He spoke to his sheep, almost with affection. "Let's go," he said as he maneuvered her up the hill.

Neither the farmer nor Lucy stopped to look at me as they made their way home. I felt they each owed me thanks — the farmer for my feigned assistance, Lucy for my attempts to free her once and for all. But it was clear to me the two had a special bond, and now that they were reunited, they were oblivious to me and the rest of the world. The farmer would take Lucy home. Hopefully, he would shear her and sell the wool for sweaters. The alternative was too sad to contemplate.

Just to be safe, I stuck to fish and chips the rest of my time in Ireland.

TRAVEL HUMOR MASTERCLASS!

TUESDAYS: APRIL 27 TO JUNE 1

If you've enjoyed today's workshop and you'd like to learn more, I'd love for you to join me in a six-week masterclass on how to write travel humor. We'll explore all the key elements to great travel writing and great humor writing and squash them all together in a fun and informative, six-week hands-on workshop.

Our group of four to eight aspiring travel humorists will meet on Zoom – 6 to 7:30 p.m. Pacific Time / 9 to 10:30 p.m. Eastern Time – for six weeks from Tuesday April 27 to June 1.

The workshop will include three detailed story critiques designed not only to improve the articles at hand, but to also elevate your overall humor and travel writing skills to new heights.

The cost of this workshop is US \$379 ... but let me know you participated in the “Thinking Funny” conference and I'll give you a \$30 discount.

Space is limited and will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

(And hey ... if you're interested but this time of day doesn't work for you, please let me know. I coach writers in lots of different time zones and will be happy to add a second workshop at a different time if there's enough interest.)

To sign up or find out more, drop me an email at dave@globejotting.com and learn how to write hilarious travel tales and where to publish your stories.

PERSONALIZED COACHING

I'm not just a writing and humor coach. I'm also a certified life coach who specializes in helping people achieve their creative goals. If you'd like to talk with me one-on-one about the writing and/or comedy crafts, or you need help defining and realizing your creative goals, I can help!

I coach writers and other creative people all over the world via Zoom, Skype, and email.

To learn more about my coaching services, visit globejotting.com/coaching.

Mention that you participated in the “Thinking Funny” conference and I'll even knock an extra ten bucks off the already-discounted introductory session price.

GLOBEJOTTING.COM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

My **Globejotting.com** website has lots of my travel and humor writing, plus information on my live, online workshops; my low-cost Udemy courses; my books, and more.

You'll also find me on social media at:

- [Facebook.com/globejotting](https://www.facebook.com/globejotting)
- [Instagram.com/globejotting](https://www.instagram.com/globejotting)
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Got questions, comments, or a goofy story to tell? Drop me an email at dave@globejotting.com.