



▶ Tim Lee riffs on topics like nuclear fission and quantum physics.

Former biologist now works in comedy – with PowerPoint as a stage tool!

From Science to Stand-Up

Most stand-up comedians mine their material from subjects such as relationships, politics and scandal-causing celebrities. But Tim Lee? He jokes about molecular bonding and nuclear fission. He writes punchlines built around quantum physics, and he uses PowerPoint as his comedy prop.

Lee is a trained biologist who earned his Ph.D. at the University of California, Davis. He spent years in academia, developing simulation and analytical models of population dynamics before discovering that it bored him. Then something funny happened: The scientist turned his professional sights to stand-up comedy.

First, there was a small career detour. After abandoning academia, he worked as a computer programmer for Charles Schwab. But he still didn't feel fulfilled. One night he performed at an open-mic comedy event in a San Francisco Laundromat – and was instantly hooked. Lee soon found that PowerPoint was a fitting stage tool for his science-themed act.

He has since found success on

YouTube, with more than 3 million views of his videos, and is performing sold-out shows at comedy venues from New York to San Diego. Lee's corporate comedy clients include Johnson and Johnson, Genentech and Microsoft.

Here, the stand-up comic answers questions from the *Toastmaster* magazine:

When did you know that you wanted to do comedy?

After graduate school I was at a point in my life where I knew what I *didn't* want to do. I was bored with the kind of research I was doing. I gave corporate America a shot and found the work was just as boring – plus, I had to spend countless hours in meetings listening to people avoid making decisions. I had to try something new to spice up my life. I chose stand-up comedy. It was painful at first, but I could deal with honest pain easier than boredom.

What made you give up a promising career in science to stand up and tell jokes?

At some point you have to have a vision for yourself and go for it. If you don't, someone else will create that vision for you and force you to live it. By most people's standards I should have been happy with where I was, but honestly I wasn't. When comedy came along, I knew I loved it; I wasn't going to let it slip through my fingers.

Why do you use PowerPoint in your act?

My favorite professors would throw gag slides into their presentations and I decided I would as well. A few months after I started doing stand-up comedy I found an open mic [event] that had a PowerPoint set-up. I asked the emcee if I could try some PowerPoint science jokes in front of the regular audience. He agreed, and to my surprise the audience loved it!

What type of people are in your typical audience?

I perform everywhere: theaters, comedy clubs, colleges, company events. The one thing that my fans have in common is intellectual curiosity. They're generally pretty smart people. That keeps me on my toes.

How do you tailor your material to your audience?

I always work clean. I don't have to change it up for the corporate audience or the theater crowd. I decided early on that I wanted to work clean and I've stuck to that.

Do you write all your own jokes?

Yes! I like writing almost as much as performing, so I wouldn't dream of having someone do it for me.

How do you pick your topics?

I'm not an epiphany comic – i.e., most of my jokes don't just come to me. I usually sit down with a textbook, try to understand a particular topic at a deeper level, then imagine I have to teach it to a student. How could I teach it to them humorously?

Who is a bigger influence on you – comedian Dane Cook or Albert Einstein?

It depends on how you look at it. It's all relative.

It has been said PowerPoint is overused in corporate presentations. What's your opinion?

PowerPoint is the only form of torture still legal in the United States. But I believe PowerPoint can be used for good. I believe that one day the people who use PowerPoint will have a point. I believe that one day no one will read their slides aloud to an audience that has already read them in their head. I believe that one day presenters will check their figures before they present them. I believe that one day people from HR will join hands with people from engineering and say, "I understood why we had to sit through that!"

What tips would you offer to engineers and scientists about how to live up to their presentations?

No one pays attention to one topic for more than seven minutes, so you need to change it up about every seven minutes. What if I can't explain a topic in seven

minutes? It's fine to spend some time talking about one subject, then move on to another, then come back [to the first subject]. The presentation doesn't have to be completely linear. In fact, it's more interesting if it isn't.

Once you've lost the audience, you might as well not be talking, because no one is listening.

Should all speakers open their presentations with a joke?

If you are good with jokes, go for it. Jokes are very good at breaking tension and helping people relax. That opens minds a little bit. If you're not good at telling jokes, a brief personal anecdote will draw the audience in as well. You're sharing a little bit about yourself, and that gives them a reason to care about what you're saying. 

To learn more about Tim Lee, or to contact him, visit powerpointcomedian.com.

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