

# **The Jerk (1979) - A Screenwriter's Breakdown for Educators**

Written by Steve Martin, Carl Gottlieb, and Michael Elias, “The Jerk” (1979) is a landmark in absurdist comedy. Beneath its slapstick surface lies a story that satirizes the American Dream while delivering timeless humor. From running gags to outrageous character arcs, the screenplay blends heart, satire, and pure ridiculousness into a comedy classic.

## **Key Themes for Screenwriters and Educators:**

### **1. Absurdity with Heart:**

Navin’s innocence makes even the most absurd scenarios charming. Earnestness anchors the comedy.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Sincerity can make stupidity endearing.
- Heart softens outrageous humor.

### **2. The ‘Fish Out of Water’ Trope Turned to Eleven:**

Navin’s outsider status drives the plot and gags. Each situation escalates hilariously beyond reason.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Escalate absurdity logically within your story world.
- Amplify the unfamiliar to maximize comedic effect.

### **3. Running Gags That Actually Pay Off:**

Jokes like ‘He hates these cans!’ build and evolve over the story. Running gags deepen the comedic payoff.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Evolve running jokes beyond simple repetition.
- Plant and escalate for maximum impact.

#### **4. Satire of the American Dream:**

Navin's rise and fall lampoons consumerism and fame obsession. The story critiques without losing comedic punch.

##### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Use satire to add depth to comedy.
- Social critique can enhance—not dampen—humor.

#### **5. Dialogue That Leans Into the Ridiculous:**

Deadpan delivery makes absurd lines iconic. Navin's earnest belief in his own nonsense drives laughs.

##### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Write dialogue that commits fully to the joke.
- Let characters believe in their absurdity.

##### **Legacy:**

"The Jerk" endures as a blueprint for absurdist, character-driven comedy. Its screenplay showcases how heart, satire, and total commitment to the ridiculous can create a timeless, beloved classic.

© 2025

8FLiX Institute

545 King St., West

Toronto, ON., Canada M5V 1M1

+1 (647) 317-9057

8flix.com

