



Comedy Improv

Teacher's Guide



Introduction

In this highly-interactive workshop, students will learn and practice the basics of creating comedy improv performances, similar to what you might see on *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?* Comedy Improv is available as an age-appropriate, two-hour workshop, or a longer class consisting of six two-hour sessions. Either way, you and your students are guaranteed to have fun!

- **In the two-hour workshop (grades 4-8)**, we'll start by learning a few basic elements of improv—Storytelling, Objectives, “Yes, And,” and Collaboration. Then, we'll put our skills to use by presenting simple improv performances for the whole class!
- **In the six-session workshop (grades 6-12)**, we'll learn more in-depth principles of improv, like character creation, interacting with the audience, and critiquing one another's work. Plus, we'll learn more complex performance styles and go deeper into the fundamentals covered in the two-hour workshop. We'll conclude the workshop with a special performance for parents or other classes! (*Requires six two-hour sessions, for a total of twelve class hours.*)



Principles Covered

Two-hour workshop: Students will learn fundamental principles of creating improvisational theatre, and use them to perform short scenes.

- **Story Structure**
Students will apply the elements of Exposition, Inciting Incident, Rising Action, Climax, Resolution as they craft verbal scenes and stories. AH--1.3.1.¹*
- **Conflict in Drama and Objectives**
Students will understand that when characters have opposing goals, conflict—which is the foundation of theatre—is the result. AH--1.3.1, AH-04-1.3.2, AH-08-1.3.3.*

drama by george

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¹ These codes reference the Kentucky Department of Education assessment information. An asterisk (*) refers to any grade level from 4-8.

- **Collaboration**
Students will give and take suggestions from other actors to make their scenes stronger. PL--1.1.2.*
- **Elements of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication**
Students will practice vocal projection, diction, vocal expression, gestures, and facial expression. AH--1.3.1.*
- **Performance**
Students will present a short scene in front of their peers. AH--4.3.1, AH-*-4.3.2.*

Six-session workshop (12 hours total): Students will learn more advanced techniques for creating improvisational theatre, and use them to perform much more diverse and complex scenes.²

- **Story Structure**
Students will apply the elements of Exposition, Inciting Incident, Rising Action, Climax, Resolution. AH-HS-1.3.1.
- **Conflict in Drama and Objectives**
Students will understand that when characters have opposing goals, conflict is the result—conflict is the most fundamental part of any story. AH-HS-1.3.1.
- **Elements of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication**
Students will practice vocal projection, enunciation (good diction), vocal expression, gestures, and facial expression. AH-HS-1.3.1.
- **Performance**
Students will present a short scene in front of their peers. AH-HS-4.3.1.
- **Peer Collaboration and Evaluation**
Students will contribute to and critique each others' performances. AH-HS-1.3.1.
- **Character Relationships**
Students will establish concrete, specific, and in-true-to-life relationships onstage. AH-HS-1.3.1.
- **Purposes of Improvisational Theatre**
Students will survey the functions of improv beyond comedic entertainment. AH-HS-3.3.1.

² As compared to the two-hour workshop.



Pre-Workshop Activities

Before the day of your improv workshop, you might try exposing your students to some of these activities!

Watch the Pros Do It

Show your students a *partial* episode (*partial* because regrettably, you will probably need to omit some segments due to content) of *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?* It's a great introduction to the world of Comedy Improv! At the time of this writing (October 2007), the show is currently airing on ABC Family—check their website (www.abcfamily.com) for times.

Do Some Role-Playing

Students often have a little trouble at first improvising on their feet. A great way to prepare them for “real” comedy improv is by role-playing. Give them a simple situation with two characters who have opposing goals (generating a conflict). Particularly with younger students, play each scenario more than once, encouraging each twosome to approach the scene differently. (For example, in the first scene below about cheating, did the student do it or not? Different answers to that question will produce very different scenes!)

- *A teacher is convinced a student cheated on a test. The student insists she did not cheat.*
- *A big sister has found a note that her little brother got from a girl. The sister threatens to show it to their parents! The little brother begs her to give it back to him.*
- *A kid desperately wants to attend his best friend's birthday party. His Mom tells him he won't be able to go because their family will be out of town at a wedding.*
- *Two teens find a wallet on the floor at the mall. There's no ID, but there is \$60 in cash. One teen thinks they should turn in the wallet to security right away. The other wants to spend the money before they turn it in.*
- *With older students, test their understanding of conflict in drama by having them create their own scenes using this framework.*

Storytelling

One of the most important parts of improv is telling an interesting story. Improvised scenes that “die” usually fail because (1) the actors have no idea what their conflict is, or (2) they start “trying to be funny” instead of letting humor naturally arise from telling a good story. So have your students practice storytelling-on-their-feet!

- Divide the students into groups. Each student has sixty seconds to tell their group a familiar story, like a fairy tale. (With younger students, let them

practice more than once. With older students, you might want to have them tell personal stories instead of fairy tales.)

- Ask the students to evaluate each other's stories. Does each one have a clear beginning, middle, and end? Were there any parts they didn't understand?
- Now, have each group pick one of the stories and tell it again. But here's the catch: this time, each person in the group tells one sentence of the story! (For example, the first person would say, "Once upon a time there was a girl named Cinderella." The second might say, "She had to do all the dirty chores for her evil stepmother and stepsisters." And so on.) See if the students can still do it in 60 seconds!



Post-Workshop Activities

The fun doesn't end after the workshop! Here are two follow-up activities.

Life Connections

You may want to ask your students some of these questions to help them make "real-life" connections with Comedy Improv principles.

- In your everyday life, what are some situations in which you must collaborate (work together) with others? Did the improv workshop give you any ideas for working more effectively in teams? Did you find it easier to get up in front of an audience when you're working with someone else—or would you have preferred to do it alone? What are some advantages and disadvantages of a group creative process, like the one we experienced in the improv workshop?
- Improv helps us learn to "think on our feet," coming up with ideas almost instantly. What are some ways that can help us in everyday life? Were you uncomfortable with that spontaneous approach at any point? As you deal with other people, when is it more beneficial to "stop and think," and when is it best to react in the moment?
- Conflict is the basis of every story. If there's no challenge for the characters, there's no story. Do you prefer it when life is free of challenges (but maybe boring), or when it's full of challenges (but maybe stressful)? Is life ever really free of conflict? How can conflict be helpful to you? Did you learn anything about managing or resolving conflict in your life from the workshop?
- When you perform in front of others, what makes you most comfortable: reading from a manuscript, reciting memorized lines, or speaking extemporaneously ("off the cuff")? Do you expect public speaking or performing to be important in your life as an adult? How? Do you feel like the improv workshop gave you more confidence to speak or perform in front of a group?

Handouts

Three handouts for use in classroom settings will be provided when you schedule a Comedy Improv workshop through Drama by George.



Improv Resources

Websites

- **www.improvcomedy.org**
A good source for Comedy Improv games and improv web links.
- **learnimprov.com**
Another resource for improv games and exercises.
- **www.theatresports.org**
Home of the International Theatresports® Institute, an organization that is dedicated to improvisational theatre.

Books

- ***Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre.*** Keith Johnstone. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1987.
Keith Johnstone might be called the Grandfather of Comedy Improv. His book is well worth reading, but he does have some decidedly odd ideas, and I don't condone them all.
- ***Improvisation for the Theatre, Third Edition.*** Viola Spolin. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
Spolin was the first to explore teaching theatre using improvisational games. The focus of her work was not on comedy improv per se, but rather on improvisation as a teaching tool.