

10 Rules of Improv

1) Say “yes’and!”

For a story to be built, whether it is short form or long form, the players have to agree to the basic situation and set-up. The who, what, and where have to be developed for a scene to work.

By saying yes, we accept the reality created by our partners and begin the collaborative process from the start of a scene. The collaborative process or group mind helps make us giants, animals, villains, saints and more importantly put us in situations that we would normally avoid.

2) Add new information.

An improvised scene can’t move forward or advance unless we add new information. That is why new information is added after the “Yes” of “Yes ‘and!”

Example:

Yes, I washed big dawg and I fed him your steak too!

Rather than:

Yes, I washed big dawg. (SILENCE)

Example:

Yes, I accept being your assistant Heir Doctor and will gladly get you the princess’s body from the morgue tonight.

Rather than:

Yes, I accept being your assistant Heir Doctor. (SILENCE)

Saying “Yes’and” does not mean there will not be conflict or that we would accept something our character would not accept.

3) Don’t block.

The opposite of saying “yes’and” is blocking or denial.

Denial destroys or stops the addition of new information or worse negates what has already been established. Blocking is a way of minimizing the impact of new information. It is also a method for the performer to play it safe. The performer maintains control and avoids vulnerability by blocking. But in improv we say the opposite of what we would say in real life, "go there.", rather than don't go there.

Blocking at its simplest levels involves saying "no," or avoiding a subject. At a more advanced level, blocking is something that keeps the action from moving forward or the players from changing.

4) Avoid asking questions- unless you're also adding information.

Another form of blocking (in its more subtle form) is asking questions. Questions force our partners to fill in the information or do the work. It is a way of avoiding committing to a choice or a detail. It is playing it safe. However, on more advanced levels, questions can be used to add information or tell your partner the direction to go in.

Example:

I know you've been seeing Jenny for four years.

Rather than:

Are you going to tell me about her?

Example:

I can see how excited you are about going to Pirates Isle in the ghost ship, me too!

Rather than:

Are how do you feel about going to Pirates Isle in that ship?

5) Play in the present and use the moment.

Another useful rule is to keep the focus on the here and now. A scene is about the people in the scene. The change, the struggle, the win or loss will happen to the characters on the stage.

Focus on what is going on right this at this moment.

Why is your partner moving away from you?

Why did she use a questioning tone?

What did the slight smile mean?

How do you, as your character, feel about what she is doing?

Remember, it isn't just about the words; it is about what is happening. The words are tools used to accomplish or to pursue a goal (objective or need).

6) Establish the location.

Good scenes take place somewhere and at sometime. They do not take place on an empty stage. A location can easily be established in one or two lines without breaking the scene.

Examples of opening lines that establish a location:

Example One:

My God, Bob you've put the tiger in with the bison again. The zoo manager will be so pissed at us.

Example Two:

Cast off the main line already Sheila, we're going to win the race, the 1970 Lake Boona race, not like the 67, 68 and 69 races! With the new rudder we should have smooth sailing.

Example Three:

Hmm, so you're riding one of them auto-mobiles. Damn, well it is the 1890's. You New York City people, Markus, have all the modern things. Next you'll say you have electricity. I knew coming to New York would be exciting, my dear brother.

Each of the opening lines above provides an idea of a location. By working with your partner, the specifics of the location are further worked out. Of course, it is even better when you can establish location without words or with minimal use of dialogue.

7) Be specific and provide colorful details.

Details are the lifeblood of moving a scene forward. Each detail provides clues to what is important. Details help provide beat objectives and flesh out characters.

Example One:

You're the best brain surgeon in all of West Valley, Mark. That's why I chose you to operate on mom.

Rather than:

You're the best doctor in this town, which is why I chose you.

Example Two:

You mean like when you stole Dad's purple heart, you know the one he received in World War I for charging the German Foxhole with just a pistol!

Rather than:

Like when you stole the medal he won in the war.

8) Change, Change, Change!

Improv is about character change. The characters in a scene must experience some type of change for the scene to be interesting. Characters need to go on journeys, be altered by revelations, experience the ramifications of their choices and be moved by emotional moments. We go to the theater to see the unusual days characters have, not the everyday moments of stasis and stagnation.

9) For serious and emotional scenes, focus on characters and relationships.

A long form improv set should contain a variety of scenes. Some scenes will be emotional, some will be tense, and some should be funny. The easiest way to make a scene serious is by focusing on the relationship of those on the stage (their characters).

Other ways to make a scene dramatic is to hold a moment, use the silence, and focus on the shifting emotional points that emerge as a scene unfolds.

10) For humorous scenes, take choices to the nth degree or focus on actions/objects.

A good long form set is balanced. Shakespeare knew that too much pathos was wearing on the audience; hence, he had minor characters in humorous scenes such as the drunken porter in MacBeth. To create humor in improv, commit to choices to the nth degree or focus on actions and objects. Another way to create humor without doing so at the expense of the scene is to take every offer literally.

The Next 10 Rules of Improv

1) Give information to your partner.

All too often people in an improv scene will start speaking about their favorite topic- themselves and their character. While something is better than nothing- stronger scenes are built on team work. You provide gifts your partner can use- details about his character and he (she) in turn does the same for you.

Example:

Bob: Gee, Martha I always knew your degree in Nuclear Physics from Cal State would save us from a monster.

Martha: Yes, Bob- I remember when you use to have the nightmares about me saving the family from the Blob with a physics formula.

Both lines provide information that each partner can use to add to their character and the scene. Providing something about your partner- makes it easier for your partner to respond.

12) Listen to your partner.

Listen to what your partner says, doesn't say and the way he says it. Each word, gesture or pause provides tons of offers and information. Listening takes us outside of our focus on self and the worry about trying to think of something to say. It becomes about responding and reacting- much like everyday life. Go figure.

13) Respond to your partner.

Improv is about what is happening right now and the changes that occur. We need to respond to what is said, unsaid, done and undone by our partner. Building a scene is a joint process and if we don't respond we make our partner's efforts meaningless. Responding shows change, helps further plot and makes us human.

14) See the impact of your response.

Okay, you've spoken. Now SHUT UP and pay attention. Look to see the response. See the impact of your words and actions- did they work? Did you accomplish your objective? Give your partner a chance to respond to what you said and did. We expect responses and reactions in real life. We should do the same in improv.

15) Look beyond the words.

The previous examples all showed the importance of looking for details that were not expressed in words. The actions that precede, accompany and come after words are just as, if not more important. Words in improv, as in life, are tools to accomplish goals. Character goals often are quite different from the dialogue spoken. The context helps reveals the subtext.

16) Use more than words.

Don't limit yourself to words or assume all responses require words. Improv is about what is being done. What are you trying to accomplish and what your partner is trying to accomplish? Often times we speak of talking heads- improvisers who are doing nothing other than speaking with no purpose or intent. Use your body and your communication skills.

17) Accept silence and being self conscious.

It is okay to be self-conscious. It is okay not to speak. Conversation is as much about the quality of silence as it is about the words spoken. Don't be afraid to respond without words. Being self-conscious doesn't mean we have to entertain or try to please. When in doubt, use it in the scene..."you know, you make me nervous when you speak so slow." Throw your attention back on your partner and let your responses come from the moment. Words are too often used to cover up stage fright, fear of being vulnerable or real emotion.

18) Be doing but don't focus the dialogue on what you're doing.

Scenes are about relationships not what we do but how what we do changes our relationship and current position. By focusing the dialogue on actions and things we avoid interacting with our partner. We also avoid taking chances and having real emotional reactions to the situation. Let the dialogue be a bridge to the relationship.

Example:

Don: (practicing Tai Chi) Hi, Dad, didn't realize you got in from Boston already- great to see you!

Dad: (taking bags out of car)

Got an early flight, couldn't yet to see my new grandson and his father! Congratulations!

The dialogue provides a sense of character and relationship.

19) Sooner is better than later. Do it now.

When an opportunity for an action comes up- do it! Don't speak about it, don't lead up to it, don't put it off. Do the action so the scene can move forward.

20) Have Fun and Relax.

Improv should be fun. An audience loves to watch someone having fun. By letting go of fear of failure we commit more, focus more and become more fully. Practice exercises that help you relax before the show and between sets.