

Marion Cilker Conference for the Arts Education
Workshop: **Name the Monster: Improv Games for Writing**
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The Go-To Improv Game Glossary

Alphabet Conversation Story

This is a story consisting of 26 lines/sentences. You could play with an entire class/group, so each person has a line in the story, or pick a group of six to play lined up in front of the class; or have a pair go back and forth to tell a tale. The first line of the story must start with the letter “A” or any given letter (say ‘R’), then the next line must be the next letter in the alphabet, until the whole alphabet has been covered. Players that hesitate, or use the wrong letter are out, and can be replaced by another player from the audience; or you could use this improv game as an elimination game. The replacement needs to take over for the player who is out using the correct letter of the alphabet to continue the story. A secretary can be assigned to write down the story as told.

Communal Monologue

All players form a circle. One player in the middle, and that player starts improvising a monologue. At any point in time, any other player may step (or rather glide) in and take the middle's player's place, and continue the monologue. The transitions should be smooth until everyone in the circle has contributed to the monologue.

Countdown

Two players begin a short scene, maybe with just a location pre-determined. Give the players one minute to create a scene. No matter where they end up at the end of 60 seconds, stop them. Then ask the players to replay the scene, based on some audience suggestions for:

- using one particular emotion (also known as Emotion Replay)
- a time period or era (also known as Through the Ages and Historical Replay)
- a different location
- a genre of film / TV / literature (also known as Style Replay)
- in gibberish (a made-up language or sounds)
- backwards; reverse order (also known as Backwards Scene)

Disaster Movie

This improve can be played with a large number of players, or small. Have the audience suggest a type of disaster (flood, earthquake, alien invasion, forest fire, hurricane, tornado, etc.) and a location where the scene will unfold, preferably a location where lots of characters can be found. Examples include a tropical tourist paradise, a big building, a school, a shopping mall, an airport, etc. The story starts right *before* the disaster, usually some character foreseeing the disaster, discovering a bad omen or some foretelling sign, then the characters in the scene begin to react to the situation. Coach students to play old people, scientists, ex-cops, hero-types, little kids, parents, etc. The “movie” shows how what the characters do in their quest to survive. The story ends when a hero helps everyone escape and survive.

Emotional Symphony

Think of a symphony with people's emotions instead of musical instruments. That's why it's called Emotional Symphony. Start with five or six players lined up at the front of the stage. One player acts as a conductor facing the players (with his or her back to the audience). Each player chooses a different emotion or the conductor can ask the audience for emotions to assign the players. The conductor points to a player and that player makes a sound that reflects that emotion that can be repeated. The conductor uses his/her gestures to mix the sounds, increase and decrease the sounds, explore rhythmic elements of the sounds and explore the range of the emotional sounds. Variation: play game with different opinions (emotions) about a single topic. Keep the emotional diverse.

Half-Time

Two players begin a short scene, maybe with just a location pre-determined. Give the players one minute to create a scene. No matter where they end up at the end of 60 seconds, stop them. Then ask the players to replay the scene, in half the time (30 seconds) trying to do everything they did originally. Then half the time again, and see what the players can repeat in 15 seconds.

Name the Monster

Play in pairs, one line at a time. Choose a location (e.g. walk in the forest). Players must meet a monster and give it a name. The "monster" can be anything: an evil witch, a dragon, a frog with a marshmallow gun, a stinky cheese ... anything. Once the players name the monster, then they can run away from it, fight it, beat it, be eaten (and continue in the monster's stomach), make friends with it, tame it, capture it, ride it, hug it, dance with it--whatever.

One Word at a Time Story

This is an exercise to train group narrative. All players sit in a circle. The players will tell a story one word at a time. Each player provides one word of a sentence. End of a sentence can be indicated by a player saying the word "period," however that is not necessary. This is more challenging than it may first seem. For inexperienced players, have them try a familiar story like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* first. Summarize the story before they begin to make sure they're all familiar with the story. Don't be surprised if some players manage to smuggle atomic bombs and crashing aircrafts into the story. Ask the group if they can see or understand the reasons why adding those kinds of events in the story may not make the story better. You can also play this as a challenge game by dividing the group into two circles, and have them compete each other to see which group can finish the story first successfully.

Pop-Up Storybook

Choose a narrator, and split the class in half: one group will be acting out the story and one group will be the audience. On stage actors "pop up" from a lying position as the narrator tells a story. The narrator may "pull the tab" or "turn the wheel" to put some action in the page. Justification should be placed on both the narrator and the pop-up actors at various times throughout the story to help add dialogue and actions to the story. You can either have the whole story "told" by the narrator, or use the flip-of-the-page as your Edit mechanism. In the latter case, once the whole scene has popped-up, any player may start playing, talking, walking around to help tell the story through actions and dialogue. Players become EVERYTHING in the story as it's told, which

means a group of players might form a house, a cave, become trees, flowers, as well pop up as objects like a lamp, umbrella, hat, or anything to help show what's happening in the story.

Story, Story, Sleep

Players form a line on the stage; up to ten players at a time. A title for a story, and a story genre can be obtained from the audience or given by the emcee. The emcee starts the game by pointing to a player, who needs to start telling the story. At any point in time, the emcee can switch to another player, who needs to continue the story flawlessly, even if the switch happened in the middle of a sentence or even in the middle of a word. Players that hesitate, or whose sentences are not grammatically correct or don't make sense, are out of the game. The audience is encouraged to yell, "Sleep!" while the player dramatically falls asleep onstage. The story continues until there is only one player left who can end the story. Also known as "Story, Story, Die" in which players who are out must die dramatically onstage.

Super Heroes

A great way to test collaboration skills using four players to build a story. First player asks for an idea from the audience about a silly little problem, like "My Shoelaces are Untied," and a simple object, like a kitchen cabinet. Using those ideas, the first player starts a scene in which the problem arises, and his/her character is unable to fix the problem. Hence she calls in the help of a super hero or super heroine by naming the Super Hero out loud in a call for help e, e.g. "Please help me, Kitchen Cabinet Woman!" This is a Super Hero, like Superman, Wonder Woman, or any famous heroic character. The Super Hero comes in with lots of confidence about fixing the problem, only to make the problem worse. Next, the Super Hero or the first player calls in the help of yet another Super Hero. Use whatever comes to mind first like, Toothpaste Man. Again this hero comes in with tons of confidence about fixing the problem, yet screws it up even more. Then any of the players must call in yet another hero, maybe Super Mom, who *finally* fixes the problem. This game is really fun for playing outrageous superheroes.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Advice Panel

Three players form a line (or sit down) in row to form an advice panel. The audience provides questions about a problem for which they need advice. The three players provide good, bad, and really bad (the ugly) advice. Have a facilitator choose who provides which type of advice, so everyone can have a chance at offering really bad advice. If the "bad advice" is really bad, then the "ugly advice" should be even worse. Variation: have each player take on a celebrity persona and give advice that way.

Yes, Let's

Excellent warm-up, and great introduction to concept of accepting suggestions and playing along in improvisation. Pick a group activity, like throwing a party or organizing a picnic. One player starts, saying "Let's ..." filling in what she wants to do. Then she starts actually doing what she said she wanted to do. A second player jumps in, saying "Let's ..." do something else, to advance the group activity. Both players say "Yes, let's do that" and start doing whatever suggested. Third player jumps in, suggests what to do, and again all players loudly agree to do it, and actually do it. Continue till everyone has suggested something.

Works Cited

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