

Beginning and Intermediate Improv Games

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Introductory Games

1. Big Machine

What it's Good For: Big Machine works on breaking down inhibitions and fostering creativity. It can be played by a large group.

How to Play: One person begins on stage by doing one motion and making one noise. They are the beginnings of our big machine. Then, one person comes up and attaches him/herself to the first and starts a different motion and a different sound. They keep doing the motion and sound over and over. Then, one by one, the entire group comes up and attaches to the machine, each doing a different motion and sound. They can sit, stand, lie down, whatever. Once everyone is a part of the machine, then a counselor should say, "we're going to explode in 3, 2, 1" and then everyone yells and falls down and jumps away.

2. Mirrors

What it's Good For: This game is good for practicing not saying no and for loosening up.

How to Play: There are two versions. One is the teambuilding version in which the group makes two circles, one inside the other with the inside circle facing the outer circle. The inside circle are the mirrors and the outer circle people are the actors. The counselor will say something like "you are watching a scary movie" and the people on the outside will act out that scene. Then, the people on the inside have to do exactly what the other people are doing. When the counselor says freeze, everyone stops, and the people who were on the outside get to have a look around at the frozen people. Then, everyone switches and those who were on the outside are on the inside. You can also switch partners if you want.

3. Panel of Experts

What it's Good For: This game is good for minor character development, stage presence, creativity, and not saying no.

How to Play: The Panel of Experts is played like a game show in which there is a panel of five experts that know everything in the world about a certain topic. The object of the game is to be the last expert in the panel. Pick the experts first, then have the audience pick the topic. The topic needs to be something crazy and strange that doesn't actually exist so that the experts are pressed to make sense of the nonsense. Something like candy-coated buffalo chips makes for a good topic. One or two fun adjectives and an unrelated noun work well. The audience will ask questions about the topic. The trick of the game comes when the panel has to make sensible responses about the nonsensical topic. **The experts must act like experts and stay in character.** Remember, they know EVERYTHING about this topic! **Also, the experts can only say ONE WORD AT A TIME and only SPEAK IN THE ORDER IN WHICH THEY ARE SEATED.** They may NOT plan any answers together. If they speak more than one word at a time and/or speak out of turn, then that person must die a terrible, horrible, and DRAMATIC death. Also, the next answer starts with the expert next in the order after the expert that finished the last answer. After they die, they become an audience member and can ask questions with the other audience members. The last expert in the panel wins! Then, introduce the game show with a fun announcer voice and introduce the topic and the experts. Then, have the audience ask questions about the topic and the game's afoot!

Tips and Tricks: If they are taking a long time or if there are no questions from the audience, ask a really hard question. Making them sing a jingle or a song works well. AND THEY MUST SING! After they're done, sing it back because it's funny. When there are only two of them left, feel free to impose a "Lightening Round," in which the experts must say the next word within three seconds or they die. Plant questions in the audience.

4. What Are You Doing?

What it's Good For: This game is good for not saying no and breaking down inhibitions.

How to Play: This game is very simple and involves EVERYONE!!! How it works is you can divide the group into two teams and they should make two lines—one per team. The first two people in each line are the first players. One player starts by tying his/her shoe. The second player then asks, “What are you doing?” The first player who was tying the shoe then has to come up with an action, such as “chopping down a tree.” The second player (the one who asked the question) has to then start doing the action that the first player said. Then the first player asks the second, “What are you doing?” and the second has to come up with an action for the other person to do. The game continues like this until someone messes up or takes a long time to come up with an action for the other player. When someone messes up, they go to the back of their line and the next one steps up.

Tips and Tricks: If they get inappropriate, they sit out for the rest of the game. If one person is in there for a long time, send them to the back of the line (if the beat 4-5 people, send them back.) This way, everyone gets a turn. If they start with dumb things, like, “eating cake” and “eating pie,” and “eating brownies,” and “eating watermelon,” then forbid any eating altogether. (Or whatever they were doing that was stupid, such as “running to the mall” or “running home,” etc.

Scene Games

5. Freeze!

What it's Good For: Freeze is an improv classic that helps to build scene confidence, practices not saying no, and fosters creativity.

How to Play: Two people begin a scene (Let the audience pick the location) and start the scene. Then, whenever someone in the audience sees an opportunity to start a NEW scene with a new location, conflict, and new characters, they yell, “FREEZE!” The actors onstage must freeze and then the person who yelled “freeze” goes on stage and taps one of the actors out. They then MUST ASSUME THE SAME PHYSICAL POSITION as the actor they tapped out and then begin the new scene based on that moment. (i.e.: if someone kneels, say “FREEZE!” and then tap out the kneeler and ask, “will you marry me?” OR tap out the standing one and say, “No, I will NOT marry you, you’re like, 90 years old!” The new scene should continue from there.

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Tips and Tricks:

- Remember to explain that every good scene has a beginning, middle, and end.
- Remember to explain that everyone should have a different character each time they yell “freeze!”
- You may also want to explain that every good scene is driven by conflict.
- If a scene dies and no one says “freeze,” you have the option of throwing both actors out and then YOU pick the next two.
- If they are having trouble, feel free to say “FREEZE!” and do a scene. They will get a kick of seeing an instructor onstage with a kid and love tapping you out even more.
- ADVANCED VERSION (Freeze 2.0): If you think a group is ready, you can always say freeze and then force someone to take a place, or, even harder, pick the person to tap someone out.

6. Slideshow

What it’s Good For: Slideshow helps to build a concept of scene structure and, of course, fosters creativity.

How to Play: Pick four or five people. These people will be in the slides. Explain that the four or five people that you picked first have to assume positions anytime you say, “Click.” They can assume any position that is safe and camp appropriate. Then, pick one person who likes to tell stories or likes to talk. This person is the host of the slide show and they get to explain it. Regardless of whether the positions have anything to do with the slideshow topic, the host has to explain it and make it make sense. Then, ask the audience for a slideshow topic. It can be a class trip to a place, a family vacation to a place, a trip to the mall, a jungle safari with people, a service project, a day in the office, etc. Take suggestions and then pick one. THE HOST OF THE SLIDESHOW SHOULD SAY THE TITLE OF THE SLIDE, AND THEN TURN AROUND AND LOOK AT IT!!!! This is where a lot of the humor comes in. (Because if he/she says “This is my happy family” and then turns around to see that everyone is strangling each other, it’s funny.) Then, start the game.

Tips and Tricks:

- Remember to explain that the slideshow, like every scene, has a beginning middle, and end. It is the job of the host to make the scene structure.
- The host of the slideshow cannot turn around to look at the slide UNTIL he/she says the TITLE of the slide.

7. Columns

What it's Good For: Columns is the first strictly scene-based game in this list. It works on not saying no, developing scene structure, not trying to be funny, and character development.

How to Play: It is a game for four people, but only two of them control the scene structure. Two people are in a scene, but then there are two “columns of wisdom/madness/whatever,” that are assigned to one actor each. The actors begin a scene that is CHOSEN BY THE AUDIENCE and then, anytime the actors want, they can go back and tap their column on her/his head (the columns are upstage of the actors) and the columns will say one word very loudly. That word should be the next word that the actors say. They should tie it into their scene. The scene should have a structure and come to a close on its own in a short period of time.

Tips and Tricks:

- Remember to stress the 3.5 rules of improv—never say no, every scene has a structure, every actor has a character, and don't try too hard to be funny—try to be natural.
- If it goes for too long, say, “wrap it up.” To cut them off when you feel it's time, start clapping.

8. Superheroes

What it's Good For: Superheroes is good for scene structure, character development, and not saying no.

How to Play: Pick four people. These people are going to be superheroes that will save the world. The audience gets to pick the problem that they must solve. The audience also gets to pick the name of the first superhero onstage, thereby picking his superpowers. (For instance, Super Booger Man has super booger/nose-picking powers). The scene begins with only one person onstage (the one the audience picked the name for). This person must introduce the problem in some way (a phone call is good) and then, at some point, the second hero jumps in. They get THEIR name from the FIRST PERSON. The first person introduces the problem to the second, and then the third person comes in. The third person gets their name from the second, gets introduced to the problem, and then the fourth and final person enters the scene. The fourth person gets his/her name from the third and gets introduced to the problem. They brainstorm a bit, and then the fourth person comes up with a way that he/she can help the problem and then leaves. Then the third person finds a way to use his/her superpowers to help and leaves, followed, by the second, and then the first. So they leave in the reverse order from that which they came in.

Tips and Tricks: This is an excellent scene game because the structure is forced on them. Be sure to examine the good things that happen after playing this game. There's a lot of freedom, which can be good but risky.

9. Sound Effects

What it's Good For: Sound Effects is a great game for not saying no, adapting to sudden changes, and applying scene structure.

How to Play: The game starts like a standard scene game. Two players are selected, and the audience selects the scene. Then, two more people from the audience are selected to make the sound effects for the scene. One person is assigned to all the sound effects for one actor. Sound effects include any noise other than speech. Therefore, be sure to explain to the actors that there should be plenty of opportunity for noise when they build their scene structure.

Tips and Tricks:

- You want lots of noise opportunities, so you probably want a scene with a lot of action and less speech.
- Remind the actors of scene structure. When they go too long, cut them off by clapping.
- The noisemakers can make it or break it. Kids love to see their teachers do it, so that would be a good choice for one of the two.

10. Soundtrack

What it's Good For: Soundtrack is good for developing physicalization skills, which is the first step to playing most guessing games. It is also good for scene structure, fast thinking, and maintaining energy.

How to Play: Like most scene games, select two people to act. These two actors are going to mime everything and speak nothing. Then, pick two more people to be the "soundtrack" for these two—assign one for each actor. The soundtrack people stand off to the side and say the lines and make the noises for the actors. Finally, have the audience choose a scene. The actors should follow the soundtrack.

Tips and Tricks:

- Those who mime need to be big with their motions.
- Those in the soundtrack need to be loud.
- The scene you choose from the audience can have more speech than action—both are funny.
- The first attempt at this game is going to be rocky—play with it.

- Remember, the actors should follow the speakers.

11. Movie Genres

What it's Good For: This game is a medium-difficulty scene game that is good for practicing scene structure, fostering creativity, and building character.

How to Play: In Movie Genres, two players are selected to do a scene that is chosen from the audience. Then, ask the audience for three types of movie genres—i.e. horror, slapstick comedy, synchronized swimming, etc. Then, have the actors begin their scene. After a bit, you say, “STOP!” and then switch the genre of the scene. The scene will then CONTINUE FROM THAT POINT with the new genre. When you stop them for the third and final genre, yell it out and say, “and wrap it up!”

Tips and Tricks:

- Save the best for last!—That is, don't do high British last—that's a good middle one. The last one should be something like “American Musical” or “Opera” or “horror flick,” etc.
- Make sure that you make it clear that, when the genre changes, the scene should not restart—it just keeps going.

12. Movie Director

What it's Good For: This game is good for not saying no, fostering lateral thinking, and developing scene structure and characters.

How to Play: This game is very much like the Director Skit that we do at campfires. Select three actors to be in the “movie” and one to be the director. Then, ask the audience for a scene for three people and three movie genres (ie. horror, musical, western, etc.) The actors start the scene and the director starts off to the side. When the SHORT scene comes to a close, the director should step in and say, “CUT! That was terrible! Let's try it like a (insert genre here) movie! ACTION!” or something to that effect. Then, the actors RESTART and REPERFORM the entire scene with the new genre. At the end, the director says something like, “Beautiful! That's a WRAP!”

Tips and Tricks:

- Like with Movie Genres, save the best genre for last.
- Unlike Movie Genres, make sure you explain that the scene RESTARTS with the new genre.
- Make sure you pick a scene with a lot of action!

Guessing Games

Guessing Games are more difficult than scene games, but they are what most people when they think of improv. In all guessing games, there is a guesser and a clue-giver. It is always the job of the clue-giver to HELP the guesser, NOT to try to trick him/her. Guessing games often require the clue-givers to adopt characteristics that can help a guesser or sometimes they only require certain language. They are tricky beasts of the trade because, while the clue-giver wants to help the guesser, he/she doesn't want to give away the answer too quickly because that is not entertaining. There is a happy medium that must be felt by every actor. Be sure to explain this when explaining guessing games.

13. Interrogation

What it's Good For: Interrogation is an introductory guessing game that works to develop lateral thinking and character.

How to Play: In Interrogation, someone from the audience or an actor has committed a murder, but they don't know *whom he/she killed, where they killed him/her, nor what the murder weapon was*. Pick three people to be the detectives. The audience member/actor who is guessing LEAVES THE ROOM and then the audience picks whom he/she killed, where they killed the victim, and what the murder weapon was. Then, each detective chooses one of the questions (who, where, what) to help the guesser guess. The detectives leave the stage as the guesser comes back in and sits in a chair center stage. Then, the detective who is doing the "who" question enters and interrogates the "suspect" using only statements/questions that are meant to steer the guesser toward whom the guesser killed WITHOUT GIVING IT AWAY. The guesser should guess in the form of a statement like, "Elvis had it coming!" Once he/she guesses, that detective stands off to the side, making way for the detective who is going to give clues about where the victim was killed, and so on until all three things have been guessed.

Tips and Tricks:

- It may be necessary for you to play the first detective to model to the students how to best do it.
- Pick easy things to guess at first until everyone gets the game down.
- Detectives standing off to the side can help if the one interrogating is having a hard time, but each detective should have his/her turn.

14. Press Conference

What it's Good For: This game is good for maintaining energy, multitasking, and character development.

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How to Play: In Press Conference, the guesser (an actor) has done some amazing feat, but they don't know what. To begin, choose someone to guess and then send them out of the room where they can't hear. Then, choose four players to be the press reporters. The reporters, like the detectives in Interrogation, ask questions to lead the guesser toward the answer. Have the audience choose what the person did that was so amazing, and then bring the guesser back in. There should be four chairs facing to the side in a tight cube formation in which the reporters sit. The guesser stands facing the chairs, and you introduce him. Each reporter gets one question. Then, after all the questions are asked, you say, "okay, (name), are you ready to make a statement, or would you like more questions?" If they know it, they'll make a statement like, "flying to the moon on a pogo stick was the most awesome thing I've ever done," but if they don't know, they'll ask more questions until they do know.

Tips and Tricks:

- The reporters MUST have HIGH ENERGY. Regardless of whether they've already asked their question, they must raise their hands and make lots of noise every time the guesser says, "Next question."
- Feel free to change up the amount of questions the guesser asks based on the students playing the game.
- The reporters should make up a name for the magazine or newspaper they represent. The name can also be a clue for the guesser. For instance, if the guesser flew to the moon on a pogo stick you may have names like "Space Magazine," "Popular Mechanics," "Pogo Monthly," and even the "Toys 'R' Us Corporation."

15. Party Quirks

What it's Good For: Party Quirks is an improv classic that everyone enjoys! It is great for developing character.

How to Play: In Party Quirks, someone is hosting a party, but they don't know who is coming! The object of this game is for the host to guess who/what each of his/her guests is. Chose one player to guess and have him/her leave the room. Then, choose three or four people to be party guests. Have the audience chose who or what they are. They can be famous people (Elvis, one of their teachers, a counselor, Sylvester Stallone), a general person with a quirk (such as a narcoleptic or someone who falls down every time he hears the word "the"), an animal (like a squirrel), an animal with a quirk (like a squirrel harvesting nuts), a cartoon character (Mickey Mouse), multiple characters (the entire cast of the Muppet Show or all Three Stooges), or an inanimate object (like a streetlight). Once everyone is comfortable with their roles, the host of the party comes in and set up their house for a little bit. Then, you say, "Ding Dong," and the first guest enters. Each guest should get a small amount of time to his/herself to introduce his/herself and get the ball

rolling. If they aren't guessed after , ring the doorbell again and send in the second guest. This continues until all guests are in. Once they are guessed, they stand off to the side and mingle quietly. If the host is really having a hard time, then one of the other guests can help.

Tips and Tricks:

- Make sure that each guest gets his/her turn to talk to the host without being interrupted.
- Make sure that they understand that they have to ACT LIKE THEIR CHARACTER. So if they are Elvis, they have to do an Elvis impersonation. If they are a chicken, they should act like a chicken.
- Just because a chicken or a squirrel can't talk, it doesn't mean that they can't personify their character and make it talk. As long as they are acting like their character and NOT themselves.
- This is a great exercise for characterization—use it wisely.
- You may want to have a counselor be the host of the party.

16. Excuses

What it's Good For: Excuses is good for developing physicalization skills, developing character, and thinking on one's feet.

How to Play: In Excuses, someone is late for work and they are caught by the boss, but they can't think of any good excuses to get them off the hook. There are three players in Excuses—the late worker, the boss, and the co-worker. The worker is late and stands stage right. The boss catches the worker and stands center stage. The co-worker is miming (charades) excuses to the worker from behind the boss's back and stands stage left. First, pick someone for each role. Then, send the late worker out of the room. Then, ask the audience for what the late person was doing (hunting for worms), who the late person was with (George W. Bush), and how the late person got to work (Rode on a missile). Once the late worker comes in, the boss yells at him and says "YOU'RE LATE! What were you doing?!" Then, the co-worker, from behind the boss's back, has to mime to the person what they were doing. Once the late worker gets it, the boss says, "and who were you with?" The co-worker mimes who the audience said they were with, and so on until the late worker has guessed all three. Every so often (maybe twice or three times per game) the boss can turn around and catch the co-worker doing something silly and ask, "and what are YOU doing!?" Then, the co-worker also has to come up with an excuse so he doesn't get fired either.

Tips and Tricks:

- Make sure that the guessing options for the late worker are easy at first.

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- If you need to help the co-worker with ideas, stand behind the late worker and have them copy YOU.
- Use the charade symbols:
 - Sounds like—tug ear
 - Number of words—show with fingers in air
 - Which word in series of words—show with fingers
 - Number of syllables—show by tapping number of fingers on forearm
 - Movie—roll the camera
 - Proper Noun/Name—underline with finger where you wear a nametag.
- If the late worker is having trouble, the boss can give a verbal clue IN CHARACTER.

17. Playground Insults

What it's Good For: This game is good for breaking down inhibitions and developing physical skills and (a little bit of) character.

How to Play: In Playground Insults, two little kids on the playground are arguing, but they can't think of what to call each other. This game works by the kids guessing what they are going to call the other kid with the help of their three teammates, who are doing charades. Send the two kids out. Have the audience pick a word ending with “—ing” FOR EACH TEAM, an adjective (a word that describes a noun) FOR EACH TEAM, and a noun FOR EACH TEAM. The insults will sound like this: “You're a jumping, stinky, porcupine!” Once each team has the insults, bring the kids in—they should be fighting already and should keep up the kid persona until one of them wins. They take turns guessing, and when it's not their turn, their teammates can't do anything except for stand there. You, the host, determine when the buzzer sounds to switch people, but anytime someone guesses a word, it should automatically switch to the next person. The first kid to guess each word wins.

Tips and Tricks:

- Stand in the center and upstage of the kids.
- Make sure you give each kid equal time
- You may want to suggest that the teams split up the words among the three mimes.
- Encourage them to really act like little kids.
- If they can't handle acting like little kids, call the game “Office Insults” and have them be adults acting like kids.

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