

YOUR HIGH SCHOOL IMPROV SHOW PLAYBOOK

by

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What Is an Improv Show?

An Improv Show is an unscripted, live performance in front of an audience where teams compete (for no points) in various improv games led by a host/side coach. The whole show takes about 90 minutes.

Why Do Improv Shows?

The purpose of the playbook is to empower the reader to present an improv show with high school aged students in a way that will be fun and entertaining for all involved, while in a safe and controlled environment.

Educational Importance: Improv is an ideal way to motivate creative thinking, collaboration and communication, all crucial skills for the 21st century.

Artistic Importance: Improvisation helped to develop an ensemble, encouraged risk-taking, supported spontaneity, accepted mistakes as part of the creative process, and fostered a sense of humor.

Practical Importance: In the beginning, most high school improv teams are a mix of apprehension and confidence. With time and experience, confidence will outweigh apprehension. My returning students would perform an improv show to begin each school year. Tickets were \$5 (or sometimes \$10 if we needed paint, lumber, or funds to get to a conference or festival). Holiday time would feature a holiday-themed show and tickets were \$5 or \$1 and a new toy or food donation. Holiday improv shows always supported a local charity. The point being, improv shows became a source of fun, ensemble building, and much needed additional funds for our Thespian Troupe.

Host/Side Coach Guidelines for a High School Improv Show

1. **A Side Coach is not a “Side Director.”** Keep the pace moving, recognize and call fouls when necessary and have fun. Avoid the urge to direct the scene.
2. **Know your actors.** Improv actors have strengths and weaknesses. Some are great at musical improvs but challenged at anything involving rhyming. Others thrive at physical comedy, but struggle with fast, word-based improves. While you always want your students to strengthen their weaknesses during class, it is best to put their strengths on display during performances.
3. **Set the tone for the show.**
 - a. Introduce yourself and your role (and the title of the show if one exists)
 - b. Announce the running time (mine were 90-minutes).
 - c. Have a clipboard, paper and pen to poll the audience.

- i. **Insurance:** All the improv game lists on your clipboard should be pre-loaded with suggestions that you know will work.
- d. Introduce the players (by team names or individually, your call).
- e. Begin the show with one or two “whole team” games.

Remember, you do not have to be a great improv actor to direct and side coach a great improv show.

The Players Guidelines for Performing Comic Improvisation in High School

1. **Whoever speaks first, leads – they make “the offer.”**
2. **Players must listen to each other and must always accept the offer.**
3. **Don’t deny. Don’t say “No.” Don’t block the offer.**
(Even better, say “Yes, and...”)
4. **Quickly establish who you are, where you are, and what’s going on.**
5. **Act don’t think! Say the first thing that comes into your head and run with it.** (“Close the gap between thinking and doing.” - Viola Spolin 1990)
6. **Don’t dominate or upstage fellow players. Re-act to your partner. Remember that you are there to make your partner look good.**
7. **Don’t begin a scene as strangers. Use character names, not your own.**
8. **Don’t begin a scene with a question.** (Except in the game, “Questions Only.”)
9. **Play it, don’t say it. *Do something* rather than just talk about it.**
10. **Avoid physical violence.**
11. **Avoid racial, religious, ethnic, or sexual identity slurs. Stay out of the gutter.**
12. **Avoid explicit sexual references and language.**

Be a character – a real, believable three-dimensional person. The key to success has less to do with being funny than with creating real, interesting people and situations, and doing so on the spur of the moment.

Fouls – Quality Control

How to Assess and Address Fouls

The Foul Bucket: For my high school improv shows I created a “Foul Bucket”, which contained attributes written on index cards, including two cards that read, “Brown Bag.”

Violations: The following violations could result in a foul:

- **Rude, crude, vulgar, or offensive language and/or gesture**
- **Illegal use of the hands** (if a scene gets too “touchy”)
- **Unnecessary roughness** (if a scene gets too physical)
- **Delay of game** (if a scene is dragging)
- **Boring Scene** (A foul here can quickly make a scene more fun)
- **TMI** (a “pause” button if an actor reveals or is about to reveal too much information)
- **A Bad Pun** (for a bad pun that elicits a reaction from the audience)

Note: A bad pun foul does not apply with the game “185” where a bad pun is the object of the game. *ComedySportz™* calls this a “Groaner” foul.

Player’s Apology: Once the side coach called a foul, the offending player would apologize to the audience. If the audience chose to forgive the apology, they gave thumbs up. The offending player would return to the game without any penalty.

Punishment: If the audience didn’t want to accept the apology, they gave thumbs down. The offending player would then select an attribute from the foul bucket and hand the index card to the host/side coach, who would announce and initiate the penalty.

Intentional Foul: Sometimes an actor might commit an intentional foul to perk up a slow scene.

Attributes in the Foul Bucket: Here is a sample list of the attributes in the foul bucket:

- For the rest of the scene you have a bad itch in the middle of your back.
 - Note: The side coach can always extend a foul into the next game or two.
- You must sing the rest of your lines.
- You must rhyme for the rest of the scene.
- Finish the scene understanding English, but only speaking Gibberish.
- Everything that happens for the rest of the scene makes you giggle.
- Whenever you are not speaking, you must “Riverdance.”
- Whenever you are not speaking, you must do ballet.
- For the rest of the scene repeat every word and sound that you hear.
- Make very bad suggestions for the rest of the scene.
- Rap the rest of your lines.
- Brown Bag!

Audience Foul: It is possible to call a *Brown Bag Foul* on an audience member who makes a rude, crude, vulgar, or offensive suggestion. But I’d avoid this at high school improv shows. It may encourage some to say bad things just to get the foul.

SAMPLE IMPROV SHOW PLAYLIST
(There are hundreds of games that you can choose.)

DATE: _____ **SHOW TITLE:** _____

1. FREEZE TAG (locations)
2. THE DATING GAME
3. QUESTIONS ONLY
4. STANDING, SITTING, BENDING
5. THE BEAN SCENE
6. MOVABLE BODIES
7. LINES FROM A JAR
8. 185/WORLD'S WORST/LINES YOU'RE NOT LIKELY TO HEAR
(abridged)
9. IMPROV WITH PROPS
10. FILM CRITICS
11. ALPHABET GAME
12. THE ACTOR'S NIGHTMARE
13. EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER
14. THOUGHT DUBBING
15. FREEZE TAG (styles)
16. NO, YOU DIDN'T
17. SIDELINE DEBATE
18. LOVE SONG

Post-mortem: It is good to do a post-mortem with the company, acknowledging what worked well and evaluating what could have worked better. But wait until the next day or next class to do so. Don't do it right after the show. Understand that, because they are creating on the spot, being both the artist and the art, improv actors can be self-conscious about scenes that didn't go well. Always be supportive and positive.

RESOURCES

Improv Websites

The Second City, Chicago, <https://www.secondcity.com/>

“10 Reasons for Teachers to Use Improv in the Classroom” (Second City, Chicago):
<https://www.secondcity.com/network/network10-reasons-teachers-use-improv-classroom/>

Chicago City Limits, New York, <https://www.chicagocitylimits.com/>

Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB), New York and Los Angeles, <https://ucbtheatre.com/>

The Groundlings, Los Angeles, CA, <http://www.groundlings.com/>

Freestyle Repertory Theatre, New York, <http://www.freestylerep.org/>

BATS Improv, San Francisco, <http://www.improv.org/>

Dad’s Garage, Atlanta, <https://dadsgarage.com/>

Dallas Comedy House, Dallas, TX, <https://www.dallascomedyhouse.com/>

Washington Improv Theater, Washington DC, <https://witdc.org/>

Push Comedy, Norfolk, VA, <https://pushcomedytheater.com/>

The Pit, NYC, <https://thepit-nyc.com>, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://thepit-chapelhill.com/>

Philly Improv Theatre (PHIT), Philadelphia, <https://phillyimprovtheater.com/>

Montreal Improv, <https://www.montrealimprov.com/>

Whose Line Is It Anyway, <http://www.whoseline.net/show/games.html>

YESand.com, <http://yesand.com/>

LearnImprov.com, Canada, <http://learnimprov.com/>

Improv Nerd Podcast, <http://jimmycarrane.com/improv-nerd-podcast/>

Improv Encyclopedia, <http://improvencyclopedia.org/>

New Improv Page, <http://fuzzyco.com/improv/>

Monty Python, <http://www.montypython.com/>

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[Gerdes] Routledge, London, 1992. ISBN 0-415-06155-5.

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Allworth Press, 2004. ISBN 1581153252.

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Methuen. ISBN 0-413-46430-X.

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Routledge, London, 1994. ISBN 0415-047706.

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Northwestern University Press, 1999. ISBN 081014008X.

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Northwestern University Press, 1985. ISBN 0810140020.

--Wirth, Jeff. **Interactive Acting: Acting, Improvisation, and Interacting for Audience Participatory Theatre**
Fall Creek Press, Fall Creek, Oregon, 1994. ISBN 0-9632374-9-7.

--Schindler, Carol and Soter, Tom. **A Doctor & A Plumber in a Rowboat: The Essential Guide to Improvisation**
An Apar Book, Guardian Publications, 2014. ISBN 13: 978-1511544535

About the author:

Jim Hoare is the Executive Vice President of Education at TRW (Theatrical Rights Worldwide), in New York City. He has been involved in theatre & music education for more than forty years, working with high school, college and community theatres. Jim directed world high school premieres (ONCE ON THIS ISLAND and LES MISERABLES School Edition) and has taken numerous productions to the International Thespian Festival Mainstage. Jim has directed over one hundred improv shows with high school students and has presented workshops throughout the USA and UK. In 2011 he received the New York State Theatre Education Association's Lifetime Achievement Award. You can contact Jim at trwjimh@gmail.com.

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The Drama Teacher Resource Company

<https://www.theatrefolk.com/improvshow>