

# Improv Techniques for Writers

## Or, How to Drive a Stake Through the Heart of Your Inner Critic So Your Muse Will Come Out to Play

### 1. Where to use Improv Techniques:

- \* As a brainstorming/plotting tool (see #11 below)
- \* When you've got a problem or when you're blocked
- \* When you're facing a choice and can't figure out which way to go
- \* To explore character
- \* To find emotions
- \* To work out dialogue
- \* Whenever your creative engine runs out of steam!

2. **Get out of your own way.** When you purposely improvise, you give your subconscious the freedom to make the connections that drive your writing and energize your story.

3. **Leap and the net will appear.** Because you can't see what will happen, not leaping is a way of keeping things safe.\* It's a way of maintaining control. You aren't trusting yourself or your instincts.

[\* Check out [www.greenlightwiki.com/improv/Advance\\_the\\_Scene](http://www.greenlightwiki.com/improv/Advance_the_Scene)]

But remember: with Improv, you are in control. You are making a conscious effort, employing a deliberate technique. Improv is not just winging it and hoping it all works out in the end!

Trust yourself. Take the risk. **Leap and the net will appear.**

4. **"Yes, and..."** is acceptance of an offered idea and the opportunity to make a further discovery. "Yes, and..." supplies building blocks for your story.

5. **Denials** in any form will stop a developing scene or story idea cold. Don't play "Whack-A-Mole" with your muse.

6. **Actively listen** to your brainstorming partners. Quit planning ahead when you should be listening with intent.

**Make sure your characters** are listening to each other, too. When you get stuck, ask yourself if your characters are reacting not only to what was just said, but also what was unsaid. Are they listening and reacting to the subtext, the emotion generated by the other character's words?

In Improv, when a scene bogs down, the players are taught to "go line for line." \* This means that Player 1 says one line and then Player 2 bases his next line on the last thing Player 1 said. This is very basic, but can get you out of trouble and moving forward again. Works for writers, too. Try it.

[\* Check out [www.dangoldstein.com/howtoimprovise.html](http://www.dangoldstein.com/howtoimprovise.html)]

**7. Stay in the moment.** Did I mention, no planning ahead? No self-censoring allowed, either. And no judging what your critique partner is saying. If you're too busy censoring or judging, you won't hear what could possibly be the most brilliant idea ever conceived!

**8. No fear allowed.** Fear paralyzes your creative muscle and blocks discovery. But there will be no fear, because there's no judging, right?

Remember, in this phase of writing, **there are no wrong answers**. Accept the offer, agree that it's the best thing anyone could ever have come up with, and then add to it. This keeps the ping-pong flow of ideas coming.

**9. Avoid stalled scenes and talking heads.** No doubt you've read lots of books and articles telling you how to do this. But have you been able to make them work in your own writing? If you take a basic improv class and actually try these techniques yourself, where you can experience how it **organically feels** to do them, you'll discover how these tips can work for you in "real life." But if you can't take a class, these are still worth trying on your own:

- \* Have a character cop an attitude.
- \* Throw an emotional stake in the ground.
- \* Make a physical choice. Have your character fall on the floor, hit someone, kiss their dog—actions get the scene moving.
- \* Confess something. Reveal a secret.
- \* Heighten the stakes. Put something at risk. Do this with "yes, and..."
- \* Make a character do something he hates or fears.
- \* Dan Goldstein [see #6 above] suggests improvisers "Go against the voice of reason, against the "normal" choice." For example, if someone says, "I'm ugly," we tend to politely say "No, you're not." But what happens if you agree? "Yes, I've been meaning to talk to you about that." Try this and see where it goes. Discover the emotions this can awaken as each character reacts.
- \* Make BIG choices. Don't be a little ticked off—BE FURIOUS! (You can always pull back on the intensity later.)
- \* Go "line-for-line." Practice "active listening."

**10. "Get to the Funny"** - In Improv, we forego boring preamble and skip straight to the funny stuff right away. Writers should, too. Start out with the good stuff. The meaty stuff. **Now.**

Reciting (telling) the history of a character to your reader is boring. But if you allow us to experience the character's reactions and emotions in the moment, her history will be revealed in a much more dynamic fashion.

**11. Brainstorming Sessions** - Strive to create a safe and supportive environment in which to "leap."

Start off your session with a couple of warm-up exercises to get those mental synapses snapping: Zip, Zap, Zop, One-Word-At-A-Time Story or a few rounds of Dr. Know-It-All, or maybe the Alphabet Game—whatever your group enjoys. Then make an active effort to follow these guidelines:

- Always **"Yes, and..."** Accept the offered piece of information as fact, then add a little bit more to it.
- Be alert for denials, including "Yes, but..."
- Don't judge! There is no wrong answer!
- Listen actively—focus, focus, focus.
- Stay in the moment--don't anticipate.
- No fear!
- Strive to produce specific details (building blocks) to add information you can work with to further the scene.
- Use a tape recorder so you don't have to slow the momentum by pausing to write things down.
- Have fun!

## Group Exercises

### A. Warm up with: Zip, Zap, Zop!

Why do we use these words? Because they are easy to remember and because WE DON'T HAVE TO THINK - we just react. Focus on keeping the Zip-Zap-Zop "ball" in the middle of our circle from dropping, rather than on what you're going to say. It's about the ball, not about you. Use your eyes to follow the zip, zap, zops, and when it's tossed to you, receive it and then immediately toss it on to another person. **Focus, focus, focus!**

### B. New Choice!

This exercise encourages you to literally think on your feet and prevents pre-planning and over-analyzing.

Start with two people in a non-geographic location (i.e., library) and establish how they know each other (co-workers, cousins.) Decide what they're doing. Then begin a simple scene. Have a third person call out "New Choice!" at interesting moments..."I saw Aunt Susie today...New Choice!...I saw a blue Martian today...New Choice!...I saw my analyst today, 'cause I keep seeing space aliens in the stacks!" And so on. No pausing to think—just speak out the first thing that comes to mind when you've been "new-choiced."

### C. One-word-at-a-time-story [yes, and...stay in the moment, listen, don't think ahead] **These next four exercises can be done in a circle or 6-8 people in a line. Ask audience for title of a story.**

This is a story that's never been told before. Don't anticipate! Listen and stay in the moment. Let go of your need to steer the outcome, the need to be safe, and TRUST that the end result will be correct. Don't process what's gone before and DON'T THINK! If you think before speaking, you'll delay the story. The response should be reflexive rather than a carefully chosen word. **The group should make the story sound as if one person is telling it at a normal conversational pace.**

### D. One-word-at-a-time-story, Conducted Version **This works best when people form a line.** Watch the Conductor at all times and listen! Conductor will point to person who is to supply the next word. Story should be told in a continuous narrative voice.

**E. One-sentence-at-a-time-story** [yes, and..., stay in the moment, listen, don't pre-plan] This works the same way as the one-word version. Try not to use "and" or "but" to lengthen a sentence. Stories are told by many sentences, not one endless one!

**F. One-sentence-at-a-time story, Conducted Version:** **This works best when people form a line.** When the conductor points at a player, she begins speaking immediately, picking up the tale precisely where the last player left off. She continues talking for as long as—or as short as—the conductor indicates. When the conductor suddenly points to someone else, the player shuts up instantly so that the new player can pick up the story from him. This may happen even in mid-syllable. Players must watch the conductor carefully at all times. Story should be told in a continuous narrative voice.

**G. Dr. Know-It-All** [listening and being in the moment, don't pre-plan] **Line up four or five volunteers in a row**, facing the audience, squished together shoulder-to-shoulder, since the five people are actually one entity thinking with one head and talking as one person. Dr. Know-It-All is an expert in something, and he's going to answer audience questions, one word at a time. [This is a great party game, by the way—even little kids can be on a team. I've done it with a group whose ages ranged from 4 to 80 years-old!]

**H. Alphabet Game** [accept, focus, listen] - **Ask for location and how two people know each other.** First person starts sentence with any letter of the alphabet, then next person's sentence starts with the next letter of the alphabet, and so on until entire alphabet has been used.

**I. Animal Ad Agency** [Accepts, advances, "yes, and..."]

**Four or five people get into a circle so they can see each other.**

1. We're going to create an ad campaign to sell a product to an animal.  
[example: a dog food that makes dogs talk]
2. What animal is it?
3. What product are we going to create to sell to that animal?
4. How are we going to do it? [come up with a name for the product, a slogan, a spokesperson, marketing strategy, jingle, commercial, etc.]

When someone says something everyone enthusiastically says YES, GREAT, TERRIFIC IDEA, CLAPS. The next person says, "And for a slogan..." Repeat.

- In Animal Ad, everything is accepted, treated respectfully and used.
- It is the responsibility of the group to keep all members from failing.

