

20 Rules of Improv

From the ImprovEncyclopedia. The following are David Alger's First 10 and Next 10 Rules of Improv. Origin of this material was the San Francisco Pan Theater website, but the page no longer seems to exist.

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.

2) After the `and` 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!

3) Don't Block.

The opposite of saying yes-and is blocking or denial.

4) Avoid Questions.

A 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.

5) Focus on the Here and Now.

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.

6) Establish the Location!

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

7) Be Specific- Provide 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.

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.

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).

10) For humor, commit and 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.

11) 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.

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.

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.

14) See the impact of your response

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

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? 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.

18) Be doing but don't focus the dialog 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 dialog on actions and things we avoid interacting with our partner.

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.

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.