

# Improvisation PEP Course

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## PEP Course Summary

In this interactive course attendees will learn what improvisation is and why it is a valuable skill for everyone, not just actors. Participants will also try a variety of improvisation exercises to help them start practicing their new skills.

## Pre-Work

The facilitator should review and select the activities that they feel will work best for the group, the space, and the time allowed. The location should have enough room to move and should have chairs available. Tables are not necessary. Most activities will require a timer. Some exercises will require other materials and preparation.

## Introduction

### What is Improv?

Improvisation (or improv for short) is “something that is improvised, especially a piece of music, drama, etc., created without preparation.”

We are creating things without preparation and without a script every day. Even when we do prepare, we cannot prepare for every scenario. The exercises in this course are meant to give you a safe way to practice thinking on your feet, increase your confidence, and tap into your creativity.

One night of exercises is not going to make you an expert improviser, but it will provide you an introduction to a few ways to practice. The more you practice these exercises, the easier they will become and the better improviser you will be.

### Why Improv?

Improv courses have become a fairly common training offering for corporate employees. There are several benefits for the non-actor to practice improvisation, including:

- Learn to fail (and be okay with it)
  - In improv you do not always say the best line, but the more you fail, the more comfortable you become at failure. In improv comedy, you will sometimes see a “bad” line improved by the partner in the scene. In real life, you can learn to improve upon your own failures or help others when they say a bad line.
- Learn to listen
  - In improv all the players work together to bring one scene to life. Each participant needs to listen to everyone’s lines to ensure they jump in when needed and that their additions to the scene make sense. Listening is a skill we can improve with practice and practicing improv is one way to learn to be a better listener.
- Gain Confidence

- It is tough to stand in front of a group and improvise. But remember, during this course, we are all in it together. We can do these silly exercises together and when we succeed, we will find that may be easier to do other things that we feared.
- Think faster
  - Practicing improv helps train your brain to think and act faster.
- Have fun
  - You may learn a few things during this course, but most importantly, let's have some fun!

## Optional Video

This video from a TED talk titled "The Way of Improvisation" by Dave Morris gives a nice overview of improvisation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUO-pWJ0riQ#t=283>. Even if you don't share this video in the session, it would be beneficial for the leader to watch this video.

## Discuss

Discuss one or more of the following questions as a group:

- Why did you decide to attend this course?
- What scares you the most about improvisation?
- What are you most excited about?

## A Few Rules

Before we move into the exercises, let's discuss a few "rules" of this improve course:

- You don't need to be funny!
  - Improv is not just comedy. It is about living in the moment, creating something, and having fun.
- Don't judge.
  - This is a safe space. Don't judge others and don't judge yourself.
- Work as a team.
  - In the partner and group exercises, be an active participant. Say yes to what the others in the group say even if it isn't what you were thinking of. For example, if your partner says, "Hi, my name is Jim. Welcome to my store." You shouldn't say, "This isn't a store, it's an airplane. And you're not Jim, you're an antelope." Instead say something like, "Hi Jim, I was looking for some pancakes to stuff in my pillow. Does your store carry those?"

Any other rules the group would like to add?

## Exercises

*Before the course, the facilitator should choose the activities that they feel would best fit the audience and the time allotted for the course.*

After each exercise, you may wish to discuss. Some questions to ask may include:

- How did that exercise make you feel?
- What was hard about that exercise?

- What came easy about that exercise?
- Did it get easier as time went by?
- What benefit did you gain from that exercise?

## List

Approximately 10-15 minutes

*Smaller groups work best for this exercise, between 5 and 10 participants. You can also ask for a set of volunteers to do the activity in front of the group.*

First Round: The leader says a category, then one person names 5 things. Categories could include colors, animals, vegetables, fruits, pizza toppings, sports, candy bars, states, cities, stores, flowers, etc. Participants should focus on just saying the first five things that come to mind. Don't worry about judgment. Keep it simple. If your mind gets stuck, move your body (shift your weight, move your arms, etc.). The rest of the audience should be encouraging (smile, nod, laugh as appropriate).

Second Round: Now, the leader says a category and one person names 5 made up things in that category. Categories could include some of the same ones used above or others such as animals that don't exist, rock bands you sing in, books you just wrote, websites you designed, specialty stores, etc. Be confident as you list your ideas. Remember, they are made up, they can't be wrong.

This exercise can be used as a warm up before a brainstorming activity. It helps people get over over-thinking an idea. Just say what comes to mind and let someone else build on it. It doesn't need to be the best idea, just the next idea. Practicing this in a supportive environment such as this course will help you be brave in difficult situations.

## The Gift

Approximately 10-15 minutes.

*If the group is very large (over 15-20 people), then it would be best to split into smaller groups for this exercise.*

Have the entire room split into two lines. You can either count off, or simply split the room in half. People in line 1 are the gift givers and people in line 2 are the receivers. The front of the lines should face each other. One at a time, the gift giver gives something by handing an imaginary box to the receiver and saying "I got this gift for you". The receiver replies with, "thank you, what is it?" The giver then states what their gift was. It can be anything, think outside the box. The receiver should then respond with "thank you, I will use this for..." and fill in the blank as to how they will use the gift. The receiver should always be positive no matter what the gift is.

After the exchange, the receiver should go to the end of the gift giver line and the gift giver should go to the end of the receiver line.

**Variation:** Same as above, but the gift giver must give a negative gift. The receiver must still be positive about how thankful they are and how they will use it.

## Walk in Space

Approximately 15 minutes

*Facilitator: Read the following out loud to lead the group in the exercise. Pause to let the group perform each action for a couple minutes. You can even skip around and repeat some of these activities.*

This is an exercise you do individually, but together in the room.

- Walk around the room casually, head up and eyes facing forward, as if you are walking into a cocktail party you are happy to attend.
- Begin walking faster, like you are late for work or an appointment.
- Now, walk in slow motion. Visualize that you are wading through a vat of pudding.
- Start skipping.
- Now, with each skip, make a loud repetitive sound (like “ha” or “ho”).
- Switch to ballroom dancing with an imaginary partner. You can even hum some music to go with your dance.
- Stop and talk as fast as you can about what you see in the room.
- Hunch over and become as small as you can. Try hopping around as this “tiny you”.

## Turtles are Great

Approximately 15 minutes

*Before the session, the facilitator should write some common objects on slips of paper and place them in a bag (you could also have the physical objects available. Try to have at least 2 or 3 objects per participant. During this exercise, the participants will describe imaginary uses for these objects. Some example objects: kitchen tools (bowl, mixing spoon, can opener, fork, microwave, etc.); animals (turtle, cat, dog, elephant, snake, etc.); tools (screwdriver, saw, wrench, hammer, etc.); sports items (basketball, kneepads, helmet, tennis racket, hockey stick, cleat shoes, etc.); other items (blanket, pillow, carpet, tree branch, book, clock, etc.).*

During this exercise, you will need to think outside the box. We have several household objects here. You will brainstorm and list unique ways this object could be used. Start each statement with “This object is great because...” For example, if you select a turtle, don’t say “Turtles are great because they make great pets.” Instead say something like, “Turtles are great because you can tape a package to their back and turtles will guarantee same year delivery” or “turtles are great because you can skip them across flat water like a rock.”

**Variation 1:** One at a time, a participant selects an object and lists as many creative uses for that object as he/she can. Then move on to the next participant.

**Variation 2:** The facilitator picks an object and participants call out as many uses as they can (in an orderly manor). Once the group has lost momentum on one object, the facilitator selects another object. If the group is large, you may wish to break into smaller groups, assigning one participant as the facilitator for each group.

**Variation 3:** Same as above variations but set a timer for 1, 2, or 3 minutes per object.

## Just Listen

Approximately 10 minutes

*For this exercise, ask the group to pair into groups of 2 (or 3 if needed). You can either let them pair themselves or count off. Once you describe the activity to the group, set the timer for 5 minutes. Then switch roles and repeat.*

When someone is speaking to us, many times we are listening and thinking about our response at the same time, sometimes spending more energy formulating our response than actually listening. This exercise will force you to actively listen to the speaker. Active listening is an important skill that can be practiced to improve.

In pairs, pick one person to be the first speaker. Turn your bodies to fully face each other. Listener, look into the eyes of the speaker while they talk. Listen to his/her words, tone of voice, and speed of speaking. Use your peripheral vision to be aware of the speaker's body language. Listener, do not judge or try to jump ahead. Be in the moment and do not interrupt. Speaker, simply tell a story about yourself (where you grew up, describe your childhood home, talk about your school, your favorite subject, your career, how you met your spouse, describe your favorite vacation, etc.).

## Bedtime Story

Approximately 10 minutes

*For this exercise, ask the group to pair into groups of 2 (or 3 if needed). You can either let them pair themselves or count off. Once you describe the activity to the group, set the timer for 5 minutes. Then switch roles and repeat.*

In pairs, pick one person to be the first speaker (the other is the first listener). The listener should pick a hero or heroine of a bedtime story and what location the story takes place. The speaker should say yes to each suggestion and just tell a story. Be as descriptive and detailed as possible. As you get more advanced, use dialogue and improvise character voices. This exercise will improve your ability to trust your imagination and spontaneity.

**Variation:** The speaker can pause in the story and ask the listener to fill in the blank.

## My Name Is...

Approximately 5-10 minutes

*For this exercise, ask the group to pair into groups of 2 (or 3 if needed). You can either let them pair themselves or count off. Once you describe the activity to the group, set the timer for at least 5 minutes.*

In pairs, say in unison, "My name is (snap your fingers or clap your hands)" three times. On the third time, person 1 should make up a name (first and last). Now the partner should complete the round with this person's occupation using the initials of the made-up person's name (it does not need to make sense). For example, "my name is Tom Gigglesnort", "and I tidy up gutters." Now switch so person 2 makes up the name and person 1 makes up the occupation.

## Fun with Telemarketers

Approximately 10 minutes

*For this exercise, ask the group to pair into groups of 2 (or 3 if needed). You can either let them pair themselves or count off. Once you describe the activity to the group, set the timer for at 5 minutes.*

In pairs, determine who will be the telemarketer and who will answer the phone first. The telemarketer starts a standard telemarketing call (think new phone service, donation to charity, political survey, etc.). The phone answerer should respond creatively. Think of an emotion to color all your answers – think happy, skeptical, dumbfounded, angry, or confused. Ask any question that pops into your mind. For example, “If I decide to sign up with your long distance company, will you give me free oil changes for life like Sprint did?” or “I am currently getting headaches when I make long distance calls, do you know if your company’s plan also causes headaches?” Switch after one scenario or when the timer goes off (whichever comes first).

## Zip, Zap, Zop!

Approximately 10 minutes.

*Split large groups (over 15 people) into smaller groups for this exercise.*

This exercise practices sending positive energy out to a group. Form a circle. The first player starts by slapping his/her hands together and pointing to another player. While making eye contact, the first player shouts “zip”. You can also point your clapped hands to the player receiving your “zip”.

The receiving player then repeats the hand clap, makes eye contact with another random player and shouts “zap”. Again, you can also point your clapped hands at the player receiving your “zap”.

The receiving player then repeats with a “zop”.

The next receiver returns to “zip” and this continues as “zip”, “zap”, and “zop”. As the group gets the hang of it, pick up the pace.

## Everybody Go

Approximately 10-20 minutes (depending on the size of the group).

Have the group form a large circle with some space between each participant.

The first player shouts, “everybody go”, and then he/she makes a huge full-bodied physical movement and a big gut-wrenching noise to go with it. Everyone in the circle then pumps their arms and exclaims, “yes” and repeats the movement and sound (with gusto and excitement). Go around the circle giving everyone a chance.

As everyone commits to the foolishness of this activity, the barrier to self-consciousness is broken. In other words, if everyone does it, no one looks like an idiot.

## Simultaneous Talk

Approximately 10 minutes

*For this exercise, ask the group to pair into groups of 2 (or 3 if needed). You can either let them pair themselves or count off. Once you describe the activity to the group, set the timer for 2 minutes.*

The purpose of this activity is to listen with your mind and body to another player's improvised story while simultaneously improvising a story of your own.

Sit facing your fellow player. The facilitator will choose two simple unrelated story topics and gives one to each player. Then the facilitator says begin. Each player, making eye contact with the other, begins to tell an improvised story based on his/her individual topic. The players must listen and improvise simultaneously. After two minutes, the facilitator announces time. One of the players then attempts to repeat the other player's story back to him/her word for word. When he/she has repeated the story, the other player repeats the story they listened to. Then spend a couple minutes discussing the results. You may also share your discussion thoughts as a group.

A few tips for this exercise:

- Remember eye contact. This will help you focus on the other player.
- Don't try too hard to concentrate. Relax and allow your story to flow out of you while allowing your partner's story to flow into you.
- Descriptive words and phrases tend to be remembered more easily.

**Variation:** In small groups, each pair can take turns with the exercise in front of the full group. Then the full group can discuss what they heard and saw.

## Ad Campaign

Approximately 10 minutes.

*Split large groups (over 15 people) into smaller groups for this exercise.*

This is a 5 minute, improvised ad campaign for a fictitious new product or new uses for an existing product. As a group, form a circle. Choose an imaginary household object and imagine that object is on a pedestal in the center of the circle. Someone should start by saying what the product is and a unique use for it. Then continue randomly around the circle as ideas are generated. Acknowledge and build on other people's ideas too. Agree with and support the other players in the circle.

For example, a folding card table may be your object. One player starts by saying "this table has so many great uses, such as a shield for a snowball fight". Another player can say, "yes, and it also helps you practice your balance when you balance it on your head." Continuing until everyone has suggested at least one use for the product.

**Variation:** Similarly, you could use the theme of a vacation or group activity instead of a product. Pick a group activity, like throwing a party or organizing a picnic. One player starts, saying "Let's ..." filling in what he/she wants to do. Then 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 until everyone has suggested something.

**Additional Variation:** Groups can perform in front of the full group. Each group can then take a turn in front of the audience, each selling a different product.

## Voice Activated Super Computer

Approximately 10 minutes.

*One group of three to six should complete this exercise for an audience.*

Participants should line up hip to hip placing your arms around the player next to him/her forming a “super computer”. The audience poses a question to the computer, such as “computer, what is the weather going to be tomorrow?” The line of players (the computer) begins to answer by taking turn, each player saying one word at a time to form a complete answer. The answer travels down the line in order, then back to the first person and down the line again until the leader feels the answer is perfect (or has gotten ridiculous). Change the team around and answer another question. Players should not try to come up with a complete answer; you are just responsible for one word. Trust your fellow players and keep the pace moving. The faster the computer answers, the better.

## Category Circle

Approximately 10 minutes.

*Smaller groups work best for this exercise, between 5 and 10 participants.*

The group forms a circle. The group leader picks a category (make of cars, names, fruits, vegetables, colors, etc.). First person states an example of the category, and points to someone else. That person does the same, with a different item in the category, and so forth, until everyone has one turn. (Each person can keep pointing to keep track of who has gone – or you can just remember). Repeat with a new category.

**Variation:** To make it a bit tougher, add a letter component. Either all the items must start with the same letter or go through the alphabet. For example, for fruits: apple, banana, cantaloupe, etc.

## Action Syllables Name Game

Approximately 10 minutes.

This is a great ice breaker exercise. You can also break a large group into smaller groups.

The group forms a circle. The first person says his/her name, making a gesture for every syllable. For example, Mary has 2 syllables, so she does something like "Ma-" (wave right hand) "-ry" (claps in hands). Everyone in the group repeats this. Then the second person calls his/her name, again with a gesture per syllable. Group repeats, and then repeats all previous names and syllables.

## Emotional Scene

Approximately 10-15 minutes.

*Ask for a small group of volunteers to act out this scene in front of the larger group. You may wish to repeat the activity more than once to give additional people an opportunity to participate.*

Ask for an emotion adjective (happy, sad, excited, scared, frightened, outgoing, funny, sad, zany, grumpy, cheerful, jolly, carefree, quick-witted, blissful, lonely, elated, etc.) and a scene (going to the store, eating family dinner, business meeting, happy hour, etc.)

Then the volunteers act out that scene being as outwardly that emotion as possible. For example, if given sad, act with fake crying, weeping, use sad language, etc. Alternatively, give every player a different emotion to portray.

## Walk Like Me

Approximately 10-15 minutes.

In this fun observation game, all the players should stand in a line. The front player starts walking around the room in a large circle. The second player starts following the first one, trying to move like the first player. After a few rounds, the first player goes to the back of the line, and the third player starts following and imitating the second player. Be yourself – don't purposely walk in a strange way.

Variation: Do the same activity, but walk in a strange way (large strides, waving arms like a gorilla, raise your knees high, etc.)

## Alien Tiger Cow

Approximately 10-15 minutes.

This is a fun warm up game. The entire group should form a circle. The leader should describe the three things a player can be and their associated actions:

- Alien: Hold you index fingers up next to your head, like little antennas and say “bleeb bleeb”, bending inwards into the circle
- Cow: Bend forward, hold your right hand on your tummy and say “Mooooo”
- Tiger: Push your right hand forward, imitating a claw, and roar.

On the leader's sign, every player decides to become one of the three. The goal is for everyone to become the same, which obviously won't happen the first time. Redo this until everyone is in sync.

**Variation 1:** Invent your own animals (or things).

**Variation 2:** Play “majority wins”. Animals/things that are in the minority, drop out.

## Alliteration

Approximately 10 minutes.

*You will need a small soft ball or towel tied in a knot for this exercise.*

The entire group should sit or stand in a circle. The leader picks a letter. One person starts passing the ball and names as many words as possible that start with that letter in the time it takes for the ball to get passed around the circle. Doubles don't count.

**Variation:** Name one thing, and then pass the ball to another player. That player then names another thing with the same letter and passes the ball. Continue until all players have had the ball once.

## Assassin

Approximately 10 minutes

Without speaking, everyone picks someone to be their bodyguard and somebody to be their assassin. Do not say out loud who you picked for each role. The leader says “go” when everyone has selected their bodyguard and assassin. Everyone tries to protect themselves from their assassin, by trying to keep their bodyguard between themselves and their assassin. After several minutes of chaos, the leader says stop and everyone reveals who they selected for their bodyguard and assassin.

## Questions are the Answer

Approximately 5-10 minutes

*This exercise is done in pairs.*

In pairs, you will create a scene; however you can only ask questions. The questions are never answered. There are no statements or explanations. Always answer a question with another question. Keep trying to move the conversation forward, so stay clear of circular arguments, such as why or why not.

For example, suppose the scene is a pet shop:

Person 1: Do you have any puppies?

Person 2: What kind of puppies do you like?

Person 1: What about German Sheppard puppies?

Person 2: Male or female puppies?

... and so on.

## Imaginary Objects

Approximately 10 minutes.

*This exercise is best done in small groups of 5 to 10 people.*

Stand in a circle facing each other. One-by-one, pick up an imaginary object from the imaginary table in front of you, interact with it, and pass it on to person next to you. They will then take it, interact with it, and put it back on the table. The first person needs to make it clear what the object is, so that the person next to you knows how to interact with it.

For example, pick up an imaginary lollipop, lick it a few times, put it in your mouth (with the tongue bulging out your cheek), before taking it out and passing it to the next person.

The person who received the imaginary object then repeats the exercise by picking up a new imaginary object and handing it to the next person. Continue around the circle until everyone has had an opportunity to play both roles.

## Corridors

Approximately 10 minutes

*For a large group, you may wish to have volunteers perform this exercise for the rest of the group.*

Ask the group to get in a line. The first two people step onto the “stage” standing a bit apart.

- Player 3 (next person in line) enters the “scene”.
- Player 1 says something that defines a relationship with player 3 and asks a question. For example, “will you marry me”, “I haven’t seen you since high school, do you want to go have a drink and catch up”, or “could you tell me what aisle the laundry detergent is in?”
- Player 3 responds with a conflict and a reason to leave the room. For example, “I am happy to marry you, let me talk to my mother first”, “I need to check with my personal assistant to ensure my calendar is free”, or “I am new here, let me go talk with my supervisor.”
- Player 3 walks over to player 2. Player 3 tells player 2 the situation and player 2 responds. For example, “you are finally getting married and moving out, I can have a craft room”, “you are free on Tuesday night from 8:15 to 8:20 for a drink with a friend”, or “you still don’t know where the detergent is, you are fired.”
- The players then rotate...such as player 1 becomes player 2, player 3 becomes player 1, and player 2 goes to the end of the line.
- Repeat the exercise with the new players.

## Additional Exercises/Activities to Try at Home

### Week Worth of Play

For one week, try something new each day. As you try this exercise, you will gain an increased sensitivity to how you act, how you imagine, and the world around you. Practicing your powers of observation will help you see and use the details of your life in a new way. Here are a few new things to try:

1. Sing in the shower. Sing a favorite song, then try making up a song.
2. Eat a completely different lunch at a brand new restaurant, just because. Try with breakfast and dinner too.
3. Get dressed as though you just won the lottery and you are on your way to pick up the check.
4. Say the ABCs out loud in the car. Try saying them in different voices.
5. Spend a day noticing everything as if you are just seeing the world for the first time.
6. Take extra time to notice specific tastes and smells of your food.
7. Pantomime taking a drink of water. Include getting the glass from the cupboard, using the sink, and drinking. Take note of how things “feel” and “taste”.
8. Open an imaginary present. Don’t preplan what is in the box. Take time unwrapping the ribbon and wrapping paper.
9. Tell a story to yourself. As you go, start playing all the characters. Feel free to narrate in between.
10. Brush your teeth with the wrong hand.
11. Take a different route home to or from work, school, or other location you travel to frequently.
12. Open a document on your computer, and just start typing. Type whatever comes, even if it’s just, “I don’t know what to type, I don’t know what to type.” (You can also do this the old fashioned way with pen and paper).

### Yes Mirror

For 30 days, each time you pass a mirror, stop, look closely at yourself, and say the word “yes”. Say it a few times with confidence, nodding as you speak. Let your body feel the positive connection between the word and the action. Your actions often speak louder than your words. Take note of how this exercise changes your behavior away from the mirror as well.

### Wrong Name

Spend a day walking around your office (or home) naming things the wrong name. For example, point at the chair and call it a soda fountain or a gleebeldy glook. Get creative. If you are doing this in the office, you may want to say them to yourself.

### Film Narration

Turn on your television, but turn off the sound. Narrate what you see on television including the dialogue. It is best to find a movie for this exercise

### Story Cubes

Pick up a set of Story Cubes or make your own (see links below). Roll the dice and tell a story using the images on the dice.

Variation: Write several people, places, and objects on slips of paper, put them in a bag. Draw out items and create a story.

Purchase Story Cubes: <https://www.storycubes.com/>

Make your own: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/69779417/Story-Cubes>

## Google It

Use Google search to find a random image. Then tell a story or act out a scene based on that image. There are several random image generators available, simply search for “random image generator” and choose your favorite. Please be cautious about what sort of search criteria you use to ensure you do not find any inappropriate images.

## Random Story Prompt

Use one of these random scenario generators (such as <http://shortstoryideas.herb.me.uk/scenarios.htm>) and tell or act out a short 5-10 minute scene related to that scenario. If that link does not work, you can search for “random story prompt” and pick one.

## New Uses

Choose a random object in your house and see how many different uses you can think of for it. Try counting the uses or timing yourself to see if you can get better each time you tried this exercise.

## Sources

*Improvise This: How to Think on Your Feet so you Don't Fall on your Face* by Mark Bergren, Molly Cox, and Jim Detmar

Improv Encyclopedia: <http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/>

Learn Improv: <http://learnimprov.com/>