

An Actor's Toolbox: How to Develop Foundational Skills

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This How-To is geared towards developing vocal projection, body language, and facial expression. These skills are prominent in finding success when integrating drama within any content area. Determining what a character wants defines your entire justification for being on stage. Focus on what your character is trying to achieve, not just how you feel. Play the verb and put your intention into action. "I feel sad" is dull. Fight for what you want. The characters are the core of all theatrical foundational skills.

Glossary of Pertinent Terms

Body language, projection, diction, posture, gesture, facial expression, space, timing, focus, intention, unity, vocal variety, movement pattern, repetition, alignment, posture

Warm-Up Activities. Use these quick warm-up activities to develop students' concentration, cooperation, and voice/body.

Coloring the Voice

Tongue Twisters

Introduce students to a range of general theatre tongue twisters. Add a gesture to each tongue twister and repeat it twice (e.g., Topeka Bodega, Toy Boat, Red Leather, Yellow Feather, Unique New York). Then use this activity to include specific vocabulary terms from your teaching unit (e.g., Life Science—"Sassy, Sappy Seeds"; "Crystal Chrysalis"). This activity can be followed with a series of questions about the specific vocabulary: What did we learn? How does this activity tie to our unit?

Alphabet-Based. "Bitter-Batter, Citter-Catter, Ditter-Datter," etc. Continue through the alphabet.

Short Stories. "She sells seashells by the seashore"; "Big black bear"; "Theopoulos Thistle the Successful Thistle Sifter."

Coloring Your Words

Read out loud a list of words in a neutral voice. Ask the students to repeat the words back using expression and color in their voice. They should experiment with pitch, volume levels, and pace. Example: cold, calm, dead, nervous, angry, ecstatic, giggly, harsh, soft, etc.

Projection

Have the actors repeatedly yawn with their mouth stretched wide. This will enable proper diction and volume. Breathing originates in the diaphragm (waistline). Visualize the air coming in through the belly button. Have the actors inhale deeply while you count to ten. Have them hold the breath on

ten, and then slowly exhale. This exercise will help support the voice and aid in projection. Voice levels: *Level One*–stage whisper; *Level Two*–conversational; *Level Three*–stage voice.

Greeting by Number

Assemble students in two rows facing each other and have students find their partner. Row A speaks, “1, 2, 3, 4, 5” and Row B answers, “6, 7, 8, 9, 10.” They are only allowed to say these numbers as dialogue. Give them situations such as “Row A, greet your partners as if you haven’t seen them for over a year and Row B, answer back just as enthusiastically.” Try having students also greet each other as enemies, babies, elderly people, someone asking for help, etc.

Note: Alter this exercise by working on various emotions or even vocal projection (students can stand close or far away).

Body Language/Facial Expression

Mirroring

This is a nonverbal activity. Stand in front of the class and inform your students they we will do a Mirror Activity, that they will do as you do. Begin simply. Hold one hand up, use fingers to countdown, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, slowly. Some students will follow. As they do, shake your head “yes,” that they are correct. They should then shake their head “yes” in response. Take students on a physical journey digging, searching, climbing, etc. Use large body gestures and small movements, use levels (high, medium, low), dance moves, and facial expressions. It can also be fun to allow a student to lead for a short period of time.

Lead with

Have students walk through the space (define space parameters) with their normal everyday walk. Then have them “lead with” their head for about fifteen to twenty seconds. Then switch to the following body parts: toes, stomach, hips, chest, chin, nose, and hands.

Next, have them freeze. Ask students to think/reflect on what they just did. How might it be important to tell a story? Then have them walk with the following thoughts in mind:

- Walk like you’re tired, excited, scared, bored, mad, or arrogant.
- Walk like you smell popcorn, pizza, broccoli, or fish.
- Walk like you’re carrying a dirty diaper, garbage bag, etc.
- Walk like you hear a bird, baby crying softly, siren, etc.

Recap–Compare and contrast walking with specific body parts in mind as opposed to an actual thought. Questions to ponder: What did you see your fellow classmates doing with their face? With their body? What messages did it send? What part of the body does your character lead with?

Team Building

Team to Twenty

Assemble students in a circle and explain they have to count up to twenty as a group. It might sound easy, but only one student can say a number at a time. The group needs to focus as a whole and communicate using concentration, eye contact, and pacing. If more than one student says the same number, the group has to start over at zero.

*Survival Style. You can also have the students that do say the same number at the same time sit down and not participate that round. This ups the stakes.

Hippity-Bibbity-Bop

Circle game. Students form a circle with the teacher in the center. When the teacher points to a student and says, "hippity-hippity-hop," the student has to *hop* before the teacher finishes the sentence. If the teacher says, "bibbity-bibbity-bop," the student has to say "bop" before the teacher finishes the sentence. Lastly, if the teacher says "elephant," the student pointed to has to pantomime the trunk of the elephant, while the two students on either side form the ears. They have ten seconds to form the elephant as the teacher counts up to ten. Those who fail to hop before the teacher says "hop," say "bop" before the teacher says "bop," or create the elephant shape before the count of ten must sit out that round until the game ends. The student who remains standing wins.

Note: This game is played quickly and frenetically. The teacher's goal is to get the students "out." Think of yourself as a spinner on a game board moving randomly from student to student.

Diction

Alien Translator Skits

Pair students up to improvise an interview of an alien. The alien will speak in gibberish and create an elaborate story, which no one understands. The interviewer has the fun task of introducing the alien to the class and translating what it is saying as the alien is speaking. This improvisational game will keep your students on their toes and unleash their imagination.

Creative Body Language

Alphabet Soup

This exercise works best with fifteen or more students. You will need sufficient room for this exercise. Group students into four to six teams. Designate a space for each group. Have students choose a team name in thirty seconds. The teacher will need to keep score. Inform the teams they will be working as a group, relying on each other to create the shape of letters with their bodies. The team that puts the letters together the quickest

wins the round. Students must lie on the floor and everyone on the team must be used for each letter. After explaining the exercise, call out a letter. Each team should quickly form the letter with their bodies. The first team to complete the letter gets a point. This activity is fast-paced; don't give the students too much time in between letters.

A Note on Variations: Numbers, Shapes, Punctuation, etc. For advanced classes, you can also have them re-create photographs of historical moments and stories in literature. This activity can also be used to answer math equations and/or to form the alphabet sequentially for younger grades.

Theatrical Devices: a step-by-step investigation

Tableau

Using tableau to bring life to a story is an effective way of dissecting and translating a work of art. Think of tableau as a photograph, frozen in time but enriched with character and meaning. This form of theatre resembles art found in a museum. The Pageant of the Masters is a wonderful example. Live actors are painted into a famous piece and brought to life three-dimensionally. We can look at a work of art or an old photograph and draw conclusions about the people we see and what the piece represents. We can create all possible scenarios and meaning around one image.

Utilizing tableau to dissect a book can be quite meaningful and impactful for reading comprehension. This, in turn, enables the students to think beyond the pages of the book by becoming the characters that live deep inside the story. They are encouraged to delve deep within the text discovering new interpretations and meaning. By giving students the opportunity to focus on a character's hopes, dreams, and objectives, they will inevitably come out with a greater understanding.

Exercises to Reinforce the Art of Tableau

Frozen Tableau: Live actors create a frozen image (much like a photograph) to tell a story visually and allegorically. Emphasis is placed on facial expression, body language, and intention in getting the story across.

Activity One: Reading Tableau. Bring a photograph for the students to view that depicts a pivotal moment. Have the students describe what they see and draw conclusions about the people in the photograph. What are they doing? What's their motivation? How are they feeling at that particular moment? Ask about the relationships between the characters and what the conflict is, if any.

This will encourage the students to think on a deeper level by dissecting meaning while interpreting literature.

Activity Two: *Creating Tableau*. Have students brainstorm a possible plot for a tableau. For example: a marriage proposal. Select two volunteers to become those characters. Have the class suggest ways to pose them that will tell the story. Try staging the scene in various ways, seeing which one is the strongest and tells the story clearly. Some students might suggest the boy on one knee with flowers, and so on. Once the tableau is set, have the class create a possible scenario for each character. What is their inner monologue? Perhaps there is an inner conflict about to unfold.

Living Tableau: Living tableau enables the actors to emerge from the stage picture and address the audience through monologue. Students get an inside look into each character and learn the character's inner conflicts and objectives. This gives the actor a chance to make plausible choices about the character that may not be explicitly addressed within the story, further enabling the imagination to unfold.

Activity One: Take a monumental scene from a book the class is reading. Assign volunteers to play characters in the book. As a class, decide how to stage the tableau, making sure the frozen picture tells the story through body language and facial expression. One by one, have each character break out of the tableau and face the audience with a monologue. The students should derive all they've read from the book and give a glimpse of what's inside that character.

Steps in Creating Tableau from Literature

Working with a story the students are reading is truly an effective way to get the students to think beyond the text. This enables the class to delve into the characters and discover plausible meaning to the story. By bringing the book to life, students who struggle with reading comprehension will leave with a clearer understanding of what the text suggests. It encourages them to identify intentions and motivations of each character and draw conclusions beyond what the author has presented.

Getting Started: Take a book the students are reading as a class. *Holes* is an excellent choice for upper grades. The characters are nicely defined and the allegorical nature of the book makes interesting tableau images.

Choosing Images: Identify the key scenes in the book you're reading. Decide how many tableau frames you'd like to present. Anywhere from three to nine works best, depending on the size of the class.

Staging: Have the students collaborate and create each tableau. Each piece should tell the story through the actor's physicality and characterization. The class should suggest different positions the actors can use to retell the story. Since it's a frozen image, the visual representation needs to capture the audience's attention with an allegorical feel. Think of it as a painting using all the vibrant colors to define the context of the story.

Objective: Your objective or intention determines what your character wants for every scene and how you're going to present it. This defines your character's entire justification for being on stage. Focus needs to be on what you are doing, not how you feel. Play the verb and put your intention into action. "I feel sad" is dull. Fight for what you want.

Creating Monologues: Once the tableau pieces are set, you may want to experiment with living tableau. Through monologue, actors become their characters and define what they want and how they are going to get it. They should draw straight from the text and extract meaning and hints the author has given when bringing their character to life. It's helpful if the actors practice their monologues in front of the class to get comfortable with stage presence and delivery.

Class Participation: Encourage the students (the audience) to ask the actors questions about their character choices. They will need to defend these choices by answering as their character. This exercise allows the class to delve deep into the text and create their own conclusions about their characters that may not be explicitly addressed in the story. These monologues are merely portals into the souls of the characters. The actors will become the characters through physicality of movement and vocal delivery. Their body language alone can convey a whole array of character traits.

Drawing Conclusions: Encourage students to make conclusions about their choices. Even if it's a choice that's not directly addressed in the book, they need to back it up with textual evidence. As long as it's supported and plausible, the students are encouraged to interpret a new level of comprehension.

Stage Presence: It's crucial that once a tableau piece is set that the actors stay in their frozen stance until ready to address the audience. All other actors involved in the tableau piece need to stay frozen while their peers deliver their monologues. Once they've completed their monologue, it's important for the actors to resume to their frozen state in which the tableau was initially staged.

Monologues

A monologue is simply a long speech spoken by a single character. It can be used to express mental thoughts aloud, reveal something to another character, or address the audience directly. Playwrights typically use monologue as a dramatic device, a vessel of change. One can write a monologue to introduce a new character, building anticipation before that character enters the scene. Typically, monologues are used to reveal something new about a character, something new the audience would have never suspected. A monologue is an opportunity for a character to open up and reveal any inner turmoil or challenge. An audience can quickly change their minds about a character after witnessing a monologue.

Getting Started

1.) Create a Profile for Your Character. Before writing a monologue, one really needs to understand who the characters are and what they want in the scene (their intention). It's helpful to fill out a character template highlighting key details you would like to address within the monologue, such as whom are you talking to? What has prompted you to start talking? What do you want and how are you going to get it? A template is included to help you define key details before writing your monologue.

2.) Break Ideas into Beginning/Middle/End. Before sitting down to write the most brilliant monologue ever, break down the key points you'd like to unravel from beginning to end.

Beginning: cut to the chase, hook the audience right off. Hint or disclose something is about to happen.

Middle: the meat of the story. Your monologue should reach a climax. Drop something big in the audience's lap.

End: take this opportunity to bring the story back to a sort of resolve. This does not mean that the characters always get what they want, but there should be a sense of closure.

3.) Piece Key Details Together. using the template as your guide, piece together a rough skeletal draft of your monologue. Assign sections to the beginning, middle, and end. Remember, monologues are used as a dramatic device: there is a reason your character has started talking. Think of these important story elements:

- **Who?** Define key characteristics of your characters. Who are they? What is their backstory? How do they talk?
- **What?** What portion of the story do you want to tell? What does your character want (intention)? What prevents your character from getting what he or she wants (obstacle)?

- **Where/When?** Make this clear with hints in the text.
 - **Why?** Whom are you talking to and why have you decided to speak?
 - **How?** How does your character struggle with obstacles and what tactics will he or she use to succeed?
- 4.) Play with the Text. Now that you have a direction you want to go in, channel your character's voice, never forgetting what your character wants and what drives him or her throughout the body of the monologue. Play with different words to really bring out the language of the character, and how the characters would talk to the other characters they are addressing.
- 5.) Share Your Monologue with Peers. Peer review is critical when developing your monologue. You have been looking at the same words and ideas for some time, and having a fresh set of eyes to give constructive feedback is essential. Ask for insight and interpretation regarding the character, what they think is going on in the scene, and what is driving the character to succeed.
- 6.) Final Draft. Now you are ready to write your final draft. Using your last draft and the feedback given to you by peers, get in touch with your character and write out the monologue as if it's coming from you. By transforming yourself into that character, your writing will come out much freer and naturally, honing in on the character's perspective and not your own.

Improvisation

Throughout each of the genres above (tableau/monologue), improvisation is at the core. Improvisation is simply a form of live theatre in which the plot, characters, and dialogue of the story are made up in the moment. It is spontaneous and unscripted. Often improvisers will take a suggestion from the audience, or draw on some other source of inspiration to get started. Dialogue, setting, and plot are created without a formal rehearsal. Improvisation takes an array of skills, from listening and speaking to maintaining a conscious awareness of other actors and actresses on stage.

Retelling. Retelling is an excellent way to introduce improvisation. Students can choose a favorite story to pull pivotal moments from. Have the class identify characters, plot/conflict, and beginning, middle, and end of the story. Using simple props and costume pieces, have students reenact these scenes through drama, but using their own words.

National Art Standards Addressed

TH: Cn11.1; TH: Cr1.1; TH: Pr4.1; TH: Pr5.1; TH: Pr.6.1; TH: Re7.1

Vocabulary

Center Stage: The exact middle of the stage from all directions.

Dialogue: Scripted words exchanged back and forth between actors.

Down Stage: The apron. The space in front of the curtain, closest to the audience.

Improvisation: On the cusp, actors create a scene or performance with no script.

Inner Monologue: Unvoiced words of what the character is thinking. It's most helpful if the actors are thinking of ways to get what they want from the other characters while playing the scene.

Monologue: A speech delivered by one actor that conveys perspective and insight into their story. It can be directed towards other characters on stage, to oneself, or breaking the fourth wall and talking to the audience.

Motivation or Intention: What the character wants at that exact time. This drives the character throughout the play, and the intention can change from scene to scene.

Props: An object used by an actor to help support him or her in a performance (for example, Little Red Riding Hood's basket of goodies).

Retelling: Bringing a story to life through drama.

Stage Left: While on stage, this is the actor's left. To the audience, it would be their right.

Stage Right: While on stage, this is the actor's right. To the audience, it would be their left.

Stage Presence: A strong presence is important for an actor in commanding the stage and receiving the attention from the audience. When delivering a speech, actors should look out to the audience with confidence and poise.

Tableau: A frozen stage picture using live actors.

Up Stage: The back of the stage. Stages used to be raked, the stage tilted upwards to the back of the playing area.

Vocal Variety: Finding the highs and lows in pitch, which add color and character to the range of the voice.

Sample Presentation Rubric

	4	3	2	1
Team Member Participation	Members presented equally and actively	Members presented, but one took the lead	Only one member presented; the others didn't participate	Members were not prepared to present
Rehearsed	Presentation is polished and well rehearsed	Presentation was rehearsed but not polished	Presentation showed very little rehearsal	Presentation was unrehearsed and unorganized
Vocal Projection	Projects voice well	Can be heard	Difficult to hear	Could not be heard
Vocal Expression	Speaks very fluently and expressively	Some words not spoken clearly; some expression	Hard to understand or may lack expression	No expression
Persuasiveness	Powerfully persuasive presentation	Somewhat persuasive	An attempt at persuasiveness, but not very effective	No attempt at persuasiveness in presentation
Posture & Eye Contact	Consistently uses good posture and eye contact	Uses good posture and eye contact some of the time	Unassuming posture and very little eye contact	Uses poor posture and no eye contact
Facial Expression & Body Language	Uses facial expression and body language to greatly emphasize message	Uses some facial expression and body language to emphasize the message	Uses little facial expression and body language to emphasize message	No facial expression or use of body language to emphasize message

Character Development Sketch

What thoughts are circling in his or her head? Brain

How does he or she see the world? Eyes

Memorable Quote Mouth

What burdens does he/she carry? Shoulder

What does he/she worry about? Heart

What does he/she care most about? Heart

What does he/she need to hold on to? Who/what would be considered his/her "right-hand man?" Right Hand

What is his or her weakness? Left Hand

What has he/she "left" behind? Left Hand

What or who has helped shape his/her life up to this point? Achilles Heel

The "Roots"  *What or who has helped shape*

What significant events have he/she experienced? The Road - Life Line