

Theater Resources for Classrooms

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Theater Techniques & Games For Your Classroom

INTERVIEW THE CHARACTERS: Conduct interviews with students posing as characters in a story they are writing. Holding a real microphone (and taping the proceedings if you like), ask each character a variety of questions, giving students the opportunity to range from yes or no answers to ones that require synthesis and analysis of a character's motives and personality.

MONOLOGUES and SOLILOQUIES: Ask students to brainstorm a character, defining his/her traits and background. Write a monologue from the character's POV in the character's voice and perform the monologue in character. A great question to use as the basis of the piece is: What is a secret desire you've never told anyone about?

ACT BEFORE YOU WRITE: Ask students to come up with a simple plot for one scene or a story. Before writing on paper, allow the student to explain the idea and choose volunteers to act it out. Seeing the story come to life can motivate reluctant writers and give them a road map of what to write when they actually pick up the pen.

HOLLYWOOD CLACKER: Kids accept and even embrace the idea of revision when they connect it to what happens on the “set” in movie making. A revision is like a “take 2.” Get a clacker! When you are working on revisions, grab the clacker and ask “What do you want to do for your ‘take two?’” Also use the clacker to start games, improvs, and writing exercises. The best buy on a large Hollywood Clacker: www.theatrehouse.com. Search “clacker.”

COLLABORATIVE WARM UP / TABLEAUX: Get the kids to walk around in the space (“milling”), and then announce that when you count to three they will need to form a shape together as a group (a “tableau”). The first shape should be a simple one, like a circle. Then have them mill about again and announce a slightly more complicated shape, like a triangle. Keep going and try slightly more complicated shapes, like the letter H or A. See if students can suggest a shape for the group to try. This gets them working together, communicating, and collaborating as a group.

CONSEQUENCES: One good scene-writing starter game is “Consequences”. Have each kid start with a pencil and an 8.5” x 11” piece of paper. Advise them of the ground rules in terms of content at the outset so you don’t end up with highly inappropriate results. First prompt is “(male celebrity)” – each kid writes the name of a male celebrity at the very top of the page, then fold about an inch of paper down, covering the name he or she just wrote. Everyone passes their papers clockwise. Second prompt is “met (female celebrity).” Again, after everyone writes “met” plus the name of a female celebrity at the top of the exposed page (just under the edge of the folded down part) and fold again, to cover what was just written. Again, the papers are passed and the next prompt is given: “at (place)”. The game continues with “he said (write what he said)” then “she said (write what she said)” and culminates with “so they (write what they did)” and “and the consequence was (write what it was).” The students then pass one last time and read their creations, which are often hilarious. You can then use these introductory “scenes” as the basis for more detailed scene-writing.

IMPROV GAME: ADVERBS: One kid is “it” – send him or her out of the room and have the rest of the group decide on an adverb while he or she is gone. For example: gracefully, angrily, jealously, loudly, etc. Bring the kid who is “it” back and give him or her the opportunity to ask members of the group to do things in pairs or small groups. For example, he or she might say, “Gretchen and Tim, you guys are waiting to get your hair cut and Tony is the barber. Go.” The three selected kids would then improvise the specified scene but would embody the adverb in their words and deeds while the kid who is “it” tries to guess the adverb. The kid who is “it” can instruct other group members to act out other scenes if he or she can’t guess the adverb. If the adverb is extra-challenging, the first letter can be revealed as a hint.

GET THEM TALKING (TO EACH OTHER): Kids love dialogue because (most) kids love to talk. So if you ask them to “do” dialogue without writing, you are playing to their strengths. One way to do this is to have them role play a simple scene: Person A runs a hat shop and Person B is a customer who wants to buy a hat. When Person B enters, Person A tries three different tactics to sell Person B a hat he or she does not want. Person B’s job is to try to resist all three tactics and then leave the shop. Record the scene (video or audio) and replay it to the kids, focusing on what was said, how it was said, and what non-verbal ways the two characters communicated (making faces, body language, etc.). Use these observations to fuel the activity of having the students recreate, then rewrite, the scene independently or in groups, changing the tactics or responses if they’d like.

OPPOSITES DIALOGUE IMPROV: Ask students to come up with two characters who are as opposite as possible (example: an old, serious man who loves staying inside and a young fun-loving girl who loves playing in the dirt). Choose volunteers to become those characters. Ask the students to improvise a dialogue showing those character traits.

WHAT’S MY LINE: Have the kids pair up and give them all the same one sentence line of dialog. For example, “I’m Mr. Mendoza,” or “That’s not my duck.” Give them five minutes to prepare and then present a skit that incorporates the line. See how many different ways the line can be used or said to mean different things depending on context.

NO TALKING: Break the kids up into small groups and hand a short poem to each group. Have each group of kids dramatize their poem wordlessly. Then read all the poems aloud and have the kids guess which group had which poem. Talk about how they recognized the poem through the actions they saw, and which movements were the most effective at conveying the words or mood of the poem.

SPY KIDS: Observation is the key to accurate dialogue. By encouraging students to pay attention (eavesdrop, even) to how people talk, you help them strengthen their research and note-taking skills... as well as the quality of their writing. Send them out into the world with journals and encourage them to write down (phonetically, as they hear it) five interesting words or phrases they hear or overhear per day.

PERSONIFICATION IMPROV: Sometimes kids feel more free to improvise if they aren’t trying to be a person. Ask your students to choose an inanimate object: a pencil, a pair of reading glasses, a soccer ball, etc. Make sure students keep their choice a secret! Each student then stands and improvises a monologue from the point of view of that object. Everyone else has to guess what object the student has become. This is a great way of getting at “show, not tell.”

CHESSBOARD: Suggest that students writing scenes using inanimate objects in the place of characters (label them with character names... you can use chess pieces if you don’t have other objects that will work for this purpose). That way, they can use a desktop as a stage and better see what is working and not working in terms of using the space and how characters interact.

WRITING READER’S THEATER MINI-SCRIPTS: Students can select brief one- or two-page dialogue-rich scenes from books they love and write Reader's Theater scripts for them. Have them select a cast to read and act out the scripts. Each playwright can introduce his or her production with a brief introduction to the book.

PAGE TO STAGE: Give groups of kids a short chapter or part of a chapter from a book and invite them to turn it into a script. Choose one with action, not just dialog, and discuss ways to bring action to life on stage (through stage directions or narration, for example). Have the groups get up and perform their scenes – with scripts – for each other. Encourage groups to have every member participate. Some can act, some can direct, some can write (serving as scribe for the collaborative writing of the group) and some can even serve as scenery if appropriate (for example, two people could act as the wardrobe in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*).

POINT OF VIEW: Take a chapter of a story and have students retell what happens in it from one of the other character’s point of view.

MOCK TRIAL: Stage a mock trial based on a book, where each book character gets to testify in “court.” After a discussion of how your court will operate, appoint both a prosecutor and counsel for the defense and permit each side to discuss the case and develop questions. Lawyers may call main and minor characters as witnesses. Questions should require a range of responses from simple one-word answers to those that entail thought and ingenuity.

BANANAGRAMS OR SCRABBLE STORIES: This game was invented by a school librarian when her fourteen-year-old son and his three pals played Bananagrams one day. After they finished the game, they made up a story incorporating all of their own words on the table. They took turns, each adding a sentence with one or more of the words. She said their story was amazingly creative, inventive, and funny. Your kids can try it with Bananagrams or Scrabble. It’s way more fun than writing a sentence for each of the week’s vocabulary words . . .

THE NEWSPAPER GAME: Each player is given a newspaper, scissors, glue stick, and blank paper. Each player cuts words from a newspaper and pastes them together to make a story. Put a time limit on this game so that no one attempts to write the great American novel.

AUDIO RECORDINGS ON SMART PHONE: Practice getting into character and reading with voice by recording short monologues and scenes using your smart phone’s voice recorder.

More Resources

READER’S THEATER SCRIPTS:

Erica Perl’s Reader’s Theater Script: <http://bit.ly/29ebdpT>

Mary Amato’s Reader’s Theater scripts and more resources:
<http://www.maryamato.com/resources/>

VIDEOS:

Mary Amato’s Video on Getting into Character to Write:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKSPVcFP6U8>. Mary Amato’s Video on Acting out a Story Before Writing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnj8G-9hMrc>