



# TEACHING IMPROV

THE ESSENTIAL HANDBOOK



Your step-by-step guide to  
teaching short form improv.

**By Mel Paradis**

*Includes  
16 Lesson Plans  
& 114 Games*



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A Beat by Beat Book  
[www.bbpress.com](http://www.bbpress.com)

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# Introduction

In recent years “improv” has become a buzzword in the world outside of theatre. Corporations and school districts have been adding improv workshops to their calendars at a rapid pace. Why? The skills needed to develop fabulous improv scenes are the same life skills that foster success in just about everything we do, including:

- *Teamwork*
- *Trust*
- *Agreement*
- *Adding to the discussion*
- *Listening*
- *Relating*
- *Being honest*
- *Being in the present moment*
- *Telling stories*
- *Developing relationships*
- *Making associations*

Whether you are a drama teacher looking to add a short form improv unit to your year, an improviser wanting to lead workshops or a general education teacher looking for new ways to incorporate creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication to your class, there is something in this book for you. I provide all the tools you need to empower your students with confidence through a sequence of skill-based lessons that can be easily integrated into any program.

While there are countless books and websites out there with improv games, many of them lack lesson-by-lesson strategies for teaching improv skills. The books that do teach skills are geared towards long form improv for adults. I wrote this book to save you the time of pouring through those books and websites. The lessons presented here are an amalgamation of years of research, teaching and performing.

*Teaching Improv: The Essential Handbook* is for both new and experienced improv teachers. This book was inspired by the format Denver Casado laid out in his first Beat by Beat Press book, *Teaching Drama: The Essential Handbook*. The lesson plans are written in a conversational, practical style to allow readers to feel like they are sitting in on one of my improv courses. Text written in italics represents how I would specifically communicate ideas and instructions. Once you get a feel for the “hows” and the “whys” of my teaching style, adapt it to your own.

However you decide to use this book, remember to follow the improv rules yourself as a teacher. A good improv class is like a scene. You never know what your students (scene partners) are going to bring to the table. If you are open to going with the flow and saying *yes, and* to the energy that your class brings, you will be rewarded with an amazing experience. And hopefully many laughs as well!

I got your back!

Mel



# How to Use This Book

This book is divided into two parts; **Part One** contains the 16 step-by-step lesson plans that provide a comprehensive introduction to short form improv. **Part Two** contains the appendixes, a plethora of supplemental material to support each lesson. These appendixes include helpful lists for games and scenes, trouble-shooting tips, student hand-outs, grading rubrics, and much more. The appendixes are clearly referenced throughout each lesson so you can easily access them when teaching the course.

## **PART ONE: LESSONS**

The lessons in *Teaching Improv: The Essential Handbook* are organized into three segments that build upon each other:

<b>Lessons 1-10</b>	<b>Lessons 11-14</b>	<b>Lessons 15-16</b>
Developing specific skills based on my 9 rules of improv, starting with the basic and building into the more complex.	Using those skills to create compelling and entertaining scenes and games.	Preparing scenes and games for a culminating performance.

The lessons can be condensed into a one day workshop or stretched out into an entire semester (or even year). Here are some suggestions for adapting them based on your program's needs:

### **General Education Teachers**

A great way to run this program is to focus on each skill for approximately one month. Introduce the rule with the warm-up game and schedule in time throughout the month to play the remaining games in the lesson that reinforce that skill. Use the debrief time to connect the skill to your content area.

### **Drama/Improv Teachers**

Focus on one skill for each session. Choose the activities that you feel will best resonate with your students. If you are limited in time, think about your objectives and look to the lesson overviews.

### **Workshop Facilitators**

For a whole day workshop, break down the day into the nine rules and spend 30-40 minutes per rule, playing the games you find most compelling. If you are running a half day or evening workshop, I recommend limiting yourself to three rules. Teamwork, Yes, and and Tell a Story are good ones for an "Intro to Improv" program.

If you are new to teaching improv you can run the lessons as is, following them like a script. For those who have been teaching for years, use the lessons as a guideline and adapt as needed. The game debriefs include sample questions I would ask to reinforce the purpose of each activity. Try and get your students to come to these conclusions on their own whenever possible. I purposefully filled this book with obscure games and ones that I created to give even experienced teachers new ideas!

Each lesson includes optional games to substitute or extend your lesson. One asterisk (\*) indicates a beginner game. Two asterisks (\*\*) denotes an intermediate game. Three asterisks (\*\*\*) is for advanced games.

## Routines

Each lesson contains optional suggestions for homework and grading. Below are my recommended routines for those teachers using this book as a full curriculum.

### Journals

Give each student a binder to use as a journal and to hold homework. Students should have a section for each rule/lesson where they can take notes on the rule, write summaries of games, house handouts and store graded homework.

### Homework

Every lesson in the book includes a journal and a video reflection. Printable homework handouts are included in **Appendix B-1**. Some homework has novice and advanced level instructions, labeled *Level I* and *Level II* respectively.

### Journal Reflection

The journal reflection is a way to assess if your students grasped the main ideas of the lesson. It is also used in later lessons to prep students for new games.

### Video Reflection

It is essential that improvisors watch others improvise to improve their craft. This provides inspiration for how things can be done. The videos give students an opportunity to see a lesson in action and reflect on them. Later videos give students an opportunity to see games that will be played in the following lesson. I chose videos that were relatively short, clean (PG rated) and had good sound quality. You can find YouTube playlists with all the videos contained in this book at the links below:

- [YouTube Playlist: Beat by Beat Improv Games](#)
- [YouTube Playlist: Homework Assignments](#)

**(Purchased version has links to playlists)**

**Appendix H: Bibliography and Resources** includes a section with additional video clips.

## Grading

For those teachers who need to grade students, I have included a system of rubrics for class participation, homework and the final performance.

### Class Participation Rubric

	3 Points	2 Points	1 Points	0 Point
RUBRIC	Was a respectful audience member AND participated actively in the lesson by adding to the discussion AND performing in scenes.	Was a respectful audience member AND participated in the lesson by adding to the discussion OR performing in the scenes.	Was a respectful audience member BUT did not participate in the lesson by adding to the discussion or performing in the scenes.	Was not a respectful audience member.

### **Homework Grade**

Each lesson contains a specific rubric for the journal and video reflections. They are graded on a 0-3 point scale. 3 points if all parts of the assignment are completed. 1-2 points if they are missing items. 0 points if not completed at all.

### **Final Performance**

The rubric for the final performance is located in *Appendix B: Handouts*.

## **PART TWO: APPENDIXES**

The Appendixes are sections that I like to easily access when teaching improv. Keep them handy at all times. Here's an overview of each Appendix:

### **Appendix A: Troubleshooting**

This is where you turn if you have a specific question about a problem you are having in your class.

### **Appendix B: Handouts**

Printable homework sheets, scripts/handouts for specific lessons and a rubric and grading sheets for two-person scenes.

### **Appendix C: Lists**

A comprehensive list of suggestions that you might need for a scene or game. If you are interested in a more random draw of locations, relationships or words, head over to <http://www.can-i-get-a.com>.

### **Appendix D: Sample Line-Ups**

Ideas for planning out your class' final performance.

### **Appendix E: Final Performance Rubrics**

A rubric for the final performance.

### **Appendix F: Glossary**

A quick reference to all terms unique to improv. The first time these words are introduced in the book, they are **highlighted in yellow**.

### **Appendix G: Additional Game Descriptions**

You'll never run out of things to do in class with this bonus resource. Use these games as substitutes or extensions to lessons.

### **Appendix H: Bibliography and Resources**

A list of books and websites that I have utilized over the years while compiling this curriculum. I also list a number of additional video links that demonstrate excellent improv skills.

# Lesson Activity Overview

<p><u>Lesson 1: Teamwork and Trust</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 2: Make Associations</u></p> <p>Duck, Duck, Cereal!</p> <p>Da Doo Da Doo</p> <p>Walk Over Association</p> <p>Complementing Actions Game</p>	<p><u>Lesson 3: Yes, and</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>
<p><u>Lesson 4: Listen</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 5: Relate</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 6: Be Honest</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>
<p><u>Lesson 7: Be in the Present</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 8: Tell a Story (Part I)</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 9: Tell a Story (Part II)</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>
<p><u>Lesson 10: Develop Relationships</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 11: Two Person Scenes (Part I)</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 12: Two Person Scenes (Part II)</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>
<p><u>Lesson 13: Group Scenes</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 14: Guessing Games</u></p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p> <p>*****</p>	<p><u>Lesson 15: Prepare for Performance and Creating a Line-Up</u></p>
	<p><u>Lesson 16: Performance</u></p>	

**The purchased version shows every activity in every lesson :)**

# Lessons

# Lesson 2: Make Associations

*“The strange thing is the brain connects things. Cat, bird, nest, tree, grass, house, sun, smoke. That’s what the brain does. It doesn’t go sausage, Mrs. Thatcher.” -Keith Johnstone, creator of Theatersports*

**TEACHER OVERVIEW:** Making associations through words or actions helps improvisors create something based on a suggestion. For those students who think “I can’t think of anything to say,” these activities help open the gates of creativity.

**Association: (noun)** a mental connection between ideas or things

**OBJECTIVE:** Students will practice making associations and discover tools to help them think quickly and creatively.

## **MATERIALS:**

- Homework handout for each student (**Appendix B-1**)

## **GREETING:**

- Gather students in a standing circle.
- If homework was assigned, ask a few students to share their journal entries and reflect on the assigned videos. Lead into...
  - *Those improvisors have been working together for years. They trust each other and work seamlessly as a team.*
  - *As you probably noticed, they also came up with ideas very quickly. I’m sure some of you thought, “I can’t do that. I couldn’t think of anything to say!”*
  - *They created those scenes based on associations they made in their heads.*
  - *What were some associations you saw made in those videos?*
- *An association is a connection or a link between two things.*
- *Associations give us something to work with, that we can then build upon.*
- *Today we are going to practice creating words and actions based on associations.*

## **WARM UP: Duck, Duck, Cereal!**

- *For our first activity, we’re going to play a variation of Duck, Duck, Goose!*
- Remain in a standing circle. Explain the rules:
- This game is played like Duck Duck Goose, but instead of Goose, “It” tags a student and assigns them a category. Then “It” runs around the circle and tries to get back to the person they tagged before that student can name three things from the assigned category.
- *Example: “Duck, duck, duck, cereal!” “It” runs around the circle, while the tagged student says, “Cheerios, Frosted Flakes, Kix.”*
- If the student is able to say three things before “It” gets back to them, “It” continues walking around the circle and starts the round again. If the student from the circle does not come up with three things before “It” gets to them, they are now “It.”
- **Game Debrief:** *How was it trying to come up with three things under pressure? We all have the capacity to quickly generate ideas, but it is something that comes easier with practice.*

### DISCUSSION: Associations

- *As we discussed at the beginning of this lesson, using associations is one tool that improvisors have to come up with words or actions while on stage.*
- *In the last game we got a category and thought of three things from that category.*
- *Sometimes we just get a word and need to go with the first thing that comes to our mind in relation to that word. For instance, if I say “blue”, you might say... (gesture for the students to call out random words). Were any of these associations wrong? Nope. Whatever comes to mind is perfectly acceptable. Let’s practice...*

### ACTIVITY: Da Do Da Do [[Beat by Beat Video: Da Do Da Do](#)]

- Remain in a standing circle.
- First, Student A says a word, such as *apple*.
- The student next to them, Student B, says the first word that pops into their head, such as *pear*.
- Everyone then says the two words together and finishes with the chant “Da Doo Da Doo”
  - *Example: “Apple...Pear...Apple Pear, Da Doo Da Doo!”*
- The game continues around the circle, this time with Student B providing the first word and the student next to them providing the associated word.
- If your students have rhythm, you can do this while snapping. *Apple...(snap)...pear...(snap)...apple pear (snap on pear) da do da doo (snap on second doo).*
- **Game Debrief:** *Did you notice some words end up completely unrelated? That’s totally fine! Sometimes the first thing you think of is not associated at all with what was said before you. Our next game is going to explore this idea a little further...*

### ACTIVITY: Walk Over Association

- Have the students stand in a horizontal line on one end of the stage facing the other end of the stage.
- Prompt the students with a random word suggestion.
- Students are allowed to take one step forward for each word they free associate with the suggestion.
- The goal is to get to the other side of the stage.
- Consider making it a race to see who can get to the other side first.
- *Example: Couch: big, comfy, red, lazy, movie, sleep, nap, etc.*
- For advanced students, consider providing two words - they must “associate” their way across the stage connecting the two words by the time they reach the other side.
- **Game Debrief:** *In improv, scenes move forward by making small associations, one step at a time. Sometimes you or your scene partner may say something that is unrelated to anything already created in the scene. This is a great time to use associations to get you from point A to point B.*

### DISCUSSION: Actions as Associations

- *In improv we also create associations based on actions.*
- Write the following words on the board:

**Pantomime:** *The act of communicating an action or an emotion without words.*

**Object Work:** *The act of miming the use of non-existent objects.*

**Environment Work:** *The act of creating the “where” in a scene through pantomime.*

### ACTIVITY: Complementing Actions Game [[Beat by Beat Video: Complementing Actions](#)]

- Start by discussing/demonstrating good pantomiming skills:
- *Excellent improvisors perform good object work, environment work and pantomiming.*

- Come up with several everyday actions and practice them together.
  - Example: Using a broom, washing windows, playing different sports, etc.
- The game starts with you, the instructor, performing an action, such as hitting a baseball.
- The student to your right, Student A, performs an action that complements your baseball hitting, such as jumping up and down as an excited fan.
- Once Student A starts jumping up and down, you can stop hitting the baseball.
- The student to Student A's right, Student B, picks an action that complements A's jumping up and down. Student B might play air guitar as a musician at a rock concert.
- The game continues around the circle.
- **Game Debrief:** *You don't need words to make associations. Where did we start? Where did we end up? This is how good improv is created. You take one suggestion and by making more and more associations you end up in a dramatically different place. Audiences love this.*

**WRAP UP:**

- *Today we played many games that helped us make associations. In the coming days we will use these associations to build stories and form full improv scenes.*
- *For instance, let's say you are in a scene on stage and your partner is pantomiming playing hop scotch.*
- *You can quickly make an association that hop scotch is a game usually played on playgrounds by kids. Another game is tetherball.*
- *You can then start miming as if you are playing tetherball. By miming the tetherball you buy yourself a few moments to make some more associations in your head.*
- *You might then make a quick association with these games and recess. Recess is far better than being in class.*
- *Now you have enough associations in your head to make the statement, "Mikey, I am not going back into math class. Mrs. Smith has it out for me."*
- *We now have a scene involving two kids talking about their teacher while at recess.*

**Lesson 2: Journal Homework**

*For homework you will create five association chains. Grab a magazine or a book that contains a lot of pictures. Open up to a random page and write down the first object you see. Open to another page and write down the first object you see on that page. In 4-6 steps, make a chain of associations to connect the two objects. Give yourself no more than one minute to make your connection.*

Example:

*High chair + headphones: High chair, feeding a baby, baby screaming, trying to escape, putting on headphones.*

	<b>3 Points</b>	<b>2 Points</b>	<b>1 Point</b>	<b>0 Points</b>
<b>RUBRIC</b>	Student wrote 5 association chains.	Student wrote 3-4 association chains.	Student wrote 1-2 association chains.	Assignment not done.

## Lesson 2: Video Homework

Tonight you will watch two video clips of the game Freeze. This game is all about making new associations based on players' physical positions. While watching the videos think about associations that you would make based on some of the positions the actors are in. List three things that you would have done if you were in either of those games of Freeze. For instance, in the first video, when Wayne, Brad and Jonathan are back to back to back, I thought about a conga line. In the second video, with the downward dog position that Jeff Davis was in, I thought of a dog house. Don't overthink it. Whatever comes to your mind, use it. There is no wrong.

Improv-A-Ganza: Freeze

<https://youtu.be/DZZH3RMATQY>

Improv-A-Ganza: Freeze

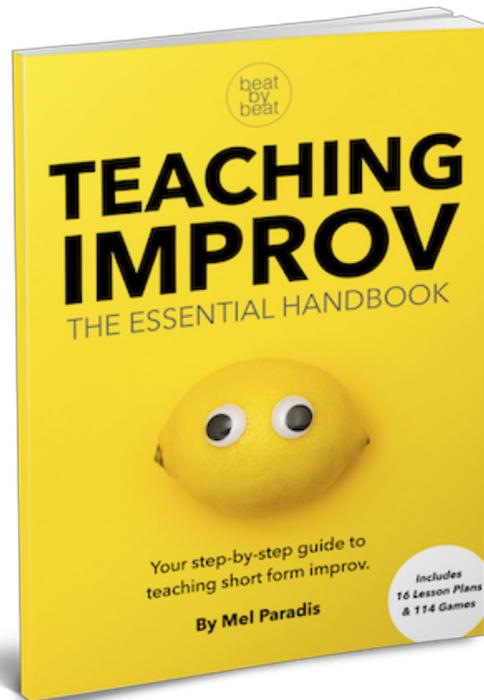
[https://youtu.be/qj\\_tWwUulA](https://youtu.be/qj_tWwUulA)

RUBRIC	3 Points	2 Points	1 Point	0 Points
	Student listed three things they would have done.	Student listed two things they would have done.	Student listed one thing they would have done.	Assignment not done.

### ALTERNATE ACTIVITIES for this lesson (*Appendix G*):

- 3 Some\*
- Malapropism\*
- Mime Whispers\*
- Freeze\*\*
- Barney\*
- Threesome\*

# Teaching Improv: The Essential Handbook



- ✓ 150-page eBook with 16 step-by-step lesson plans and over 114 improv games
- ✓ Instant download (PDF)
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