

Tips for the Improv Challenge

With Kaitlin Keddy & Vicki Smith

(Affiliate Challenge Masters - Improv)

“If I start a scene as what I think is very clearly a cop riding a bicycle, but you think I am a hamster in a hamster wheel, guess what? Now I’m a hamster in a hamster wheel. I’m not going to stop everything to explain that it was really supposed to be a bike. Who knows? Maybe I’ll end up being a police hamster who’s been put on “hamster wheel” duty because I’m “too much of a loose cannon” in the field.”

-Tina Fey, *Bossypants*

Universal Improv Rules

1. “Yes and...”
 - a. This is a classic improv rule. It means that you are open to wherever your teammates are taking the story. Too many “No” responses can bring a skit to a screeching halt. You don’t have to literally say “Yes and...” each time. It is just meant to have team members be in the spirit of accepting information that they are given and moving the story along. Don’t just say “Yes”! Add more information to keep the narrative going!
2. Listen up!
 - a. Listen to what your teammates are saying and watch what they are doing! It is easy to get nervous during the skit and get wrapped up in what you are going to say next....don’t get stuck in your own head! You may miss an opportunity to plug in a witty line or bring up a crucial improv element!
3. Limit open ended questions
 - a. If you ask open ended questions (ex- Where are we going?), it means that the other people in your scene have to come up with an answer on the fly. This could cause some stumbling and if they stumble with their answer then chances are you might stumble in your reaction too! If you can’t plan ahead then...
4. Be confident!
 - a. Once you or another team member have made a narrative decision- roll with it! If you realize that it doesn’t fit the story, you can always figure out a way to get from point A to point B. If you seem like you know where the story is going then the audience will believe you! Remember, we’ve never seen you perform this skit before! Knock our socks off! And have fun while doing it!

What DI Improv Appraisers Look For

1. Does the story fit?
 - a. Experienced improv challenge appraisers can tell if a skit has been pre-made before you even set foot in the presentation space. Having a pre-made skit is not against the rules – HOWEVER - it is very important to make sure that the skit actually makes sense with the improv elements you get! Just because you have practiced a clever song or crazy dance beforehand doesn't mean you should include it in a skit if it doesn't actually work. Be flexible with the story and see where your improv elements take you.
2. Are all the improv elements incorporated?
 - a. Your team could have the most amazing skit that makes the crowd roar with laughter or pull at their heartstrings but none of that matters if you don't fit every last improv element into the finished product. Come up with a system to remember to get all of your elements in and practice it during team meetings!
3. Are your improv elements well integrated?
 - a. If a scene's setting is "at a middle school dance", don't just point out that you are at a middle school dance. Paint a picture! You don't need to go into painstaking detail and eat up all of your skit time but the scene should be distinct. Ask yourself if the same skit could have been in a different scene without anyone noticing- if the answer is yes then you need to add more details to make it clear. This goes for all improv elements. You will earn minimal points for just mentioning a key improv element.
 - b. The second part of this includes research! Make sure you do the required research on the improv elements before your tournament. With that said, we don't want to see a team member just list off facts. Integrate them into the skit so it flows naturally. We want to see evidence that you know your research not that you can repeat it in a monologue! Figure out ways to creatively include it in the conversation within the scene.
4. Are props creative and well integrated?
 - a. If an improv challenge includes the use of physical material for prop creation, the team should practice creating "amazing" props with that material. However, not only does the team want to create an amazing prop, but that prop needs to be well integrated into the skit. Props can be costumes, scenery, devices, etc. A caution to teams to be careful NOT to include their own clothing or accessories into their prop creation.
5. Are team members respectful of each other?
 - a. Being respectful of your fellow team members is incredibly important. It sets the tone for your entire performance from the moment you are checking in until the last team member exits the presentation site. Make sure you are listening, open to ideas, and collaborating. Some team members are natural leaders and that's ok! Just make sure that one or two voices are not drowning out the rest.

Additional Tips for Improv Team Managers

1. Human Scenery
 - a. Often in the improv challenge, teams are only able to use their bodies and their brains to craft their presentation. You should be using both! Don't have a desk for your character to sit at? Human Scenery! Don't have trees to line the path of the yellow brick road? Human Scenery! Need a school of fish in the background of your underwater scene? Human Scenery! Make the most of your bodies and figure out creative ways to make human scenery!
2. Understand the Reward Points
 - a. Appraisers want to give teams as many points as possible. When appraisers are scoring teams they are looking at a scoring rubric to determine if your team hit all of the scoring elements. There is a copy of the same rubric in your challenge materials called Reward Points! Go over this MANY TIMES so you know what each element is and how it is being scored.
3. Clarifications
 - a. Each team gets 10 clarifications per challenge, per year. If there are questions or uncertainties, submit a clarification! The age old DI rule is "If it doesn't say you can't then you can". With that said, it may be better to ask the International Challenge Masters questions instead of leaving it to chance. The team doesn't want to find out on tournament day, after their performance, that they misunderstood a part of the challenge. If you ask for clarifications from the International Challenge Masters, you must bring them on tournament day!

Improv Resources

1. improvcyclopedia.org
 - a. Some of these may need to be modified for younger kids but there are a TON of improv games to practice here!
2. Learnimprov.com
 - a. Lots of improv games and warmups
3. Youtube
 - a. Search for other DI improv skits