

## ABOUT



In this workshop, we will practice a step-by-step process for brainstorming and improvising comedy scenes.

We will do a series of exercises to learn each of the key concepts that goes into creating a comedy sketch, and then put it all together to improvise full scenes.

## 1. BASE REALITY

To create a comedy scene, we first need to define a **Base Reality** - the key elements necessary for any scene: where the scene takes place, who the characters are, and what they're doing.

### EXERCISE: WHO, WHAT, WHERE

In this warm-up exercise, two players play a three-line scene.

Player 1 says a sentence, Player 2 responds, Player 1 responds with the final line. The goal is to establish the Base Reality in 3 lines: where the characters are, who they are, and what they are doing.

**Player 1:** "Hand me the scalpel. This will be a long surgery."

**Player 2:** "Right away, doctor. The patient's vitals are stable."

**Player 1:** "Good. Let's save this man's life."

After each scene, we briefly discuss: do we all have a clear picture of what's going on? Do we know where the character are, who they are, and what they're doing?

### EXERCISE: PLAY BELIEVABLE CHARACTERS

Our goal is to **establish a grounded and believable world** that sets up **assumptions/expectations**, so that later we can introduce an **absurd element** that breaks these expectations to create comedy.

Think of this as an acting exercise where we will try to get better at playing realistic scenes with believable characters, create the kind of scenes that you could see in a serious movie or a TV show.

Because our goal is to establish expectations, we will lean on the tropes and cliches everyone is familiar with, and deliberately avoid making the scene too weird, surprising, unusual, or absurd.

The scene may still contain some sci-fi or fantasy elements - a spaceship, a wizard, a spy, a supervillain's lair - as long as we all are familiar with the tropes and have strong assumptions and expectations about them.

One of us will come up with a **Location Prompt** like "Ancient Castle", "Criminal Lair", "Futuristic Laboratory", "Pirate Ship", etc.

Then two players will **play a short scene** in this location. Everyone else will watch the scene and raise their hands if they see anything too weird or not believable.

**Location Prompt:** Pirate Ship

"Captain, enemy vessel on the horizon."

"How many guns?"

"Thirty-two, sir. She's got the wind behind her."

"Then we'd better have the crew ready before she gets in range. Sound the bell."

After the scene we'll discuss what assumptions and expectations we have established.

## 2. INTRODUCE THE UNUSUAL THING

The next step is to **introduce an absurd element** into the scene, the first instance of **unusual behavior** that the scene will revolve around. Our goal is to subvert the assumptions and expectations established by the Base Reality.

To do that, think about what you'd normally assume or expect a character to do, say, think, or feel in this scene, and replace it with something very different from that:

- Something that does not belong in this scene.
- Something out of the ordinary in the context of the base reality.
- An unusual, absurd, unexpected, or weird behavior that breaks from the pattern of the established expectations.

### EXERCISE: INTRODUCE THE UNUSUAL THING

Two players start by choosing their roles:

- One will be a **Comic Character** who introduces the **Unusual Thing** - says or does something absurd and commits to it.
- The other will be a **Normal Character** who acts as the voice of reason and reacts to the craziness as a normal person would.

To help the Comic Character come up with an unusual thing to say, we select one of the **Premise Prompts** (see the next page).

Someone suggests a **Base Reality Prompt**, and the players play a 3-line scene:

- Normal Character says the normal thing to say in this situation.
- Comic Character uses their premise prompt to say or do something unusual - the wrongest, most absurd thing they can think of in this situation.
- The normal character reacts honestly.

**Base Reality Prompt:** Bandits robbing a bank.

**Premise Prompt:** A wrong thing to say or do in this situation.

**Normal Character:** "Everyone on the ground, take out your wallets and jewels now!"

**Comic Character:** "Hey, boss, are you sure we should do this? I just hate confrontation."

**Normal Character:** "What? We're criminals, Bob!"

## 3. JUSTIFY THE UNUSUAL THING

Once we have established the unusual thing, we need to **justify** it: invent a believable rationale for the unusual behavior, explain why it actually makes sense from the character's perspective.

The justification turns a single absurd action into a pattern of unusual behavior or thinking, establishes a consistent logic the character will follow to create multiple funny moments, it creates a "rule" you can follow to come up with more examples of absurd things that can happen in the scene.

To justify the unusual thing, ask yourself: **"What kind of worldview would cause the character to think and act this way? In what world or situation is this behavior completely normal?"**

Together, the Unusual Thing and the Justification form a **Premise**: the single comedic idea the scene will revolve around. For the rest of the scene, we will explore this premise and avoid introducing separate absurd elements that are unrelated to it.

### EXERCISE: JUSTIFY UNUSUAL THING

Same exercise as "Introduce the Unusual Thing", but now we go one step further. After the Comic Character introduces something unusual, the Normal Character reacts to it by pushing back and challenging this behavior, and then the Comic Character justifies it - explains why it actually makes sense from their perspective.

"Everyone on the ground, take out your wallets and jewels now!"

"Hey, boss, are you sure we should do this? I just hate confrontation."

"What did you think we were gonna do when you signed up for this heist, Bob?"

"I know, I know, it's just... you were so excited about this heist and it felt too awkward to say no. You know how much I hate disappointing people."

## 4. HEIGHTENING

Once we know the Premise, the goal is to progressively **Heighten** it: make the scene progressively more absurd, make the stupid thing even stupider, continue the pattern of unusual behavior, making it increasingly more unusual.

To do that, ask yourself: **"If this is true, then what else is true? What else is true in this world? What else would a character thinking this way say or do in this situation?"**

Use the Justification as a rule the Comic Character keeps following to repeatedly break expectations we have established at the beginning. The Comic Character will continue acting according to their worldview to create more funny moments where their behavior clashes with the situation they're in.

To complete the sketch, all we need to do is Heighten it a few times and end the scene as soon as we've made it as absurd as we can.

### EXERCISE: BRAINSTORM A SCENE

We will brainstorm an outline of a comedy sketch together.

**Step 1: Set the scene.** Someone suggests a **Location Prompt**.

Another player uses it to describe the **Base Reality** in one sentence.

**Location Prompt:** Alien Planet

**Base Reality:** On a misty alien planet, a space cadet is dying in his captain's arms. A creepy alien snake is wrapped around his leg, it has bit through his suit and is sucking the life out of him.

**Step 2: Pitch the Premise.** We select one of the **Premise Prompts**, and the players take turns in pairs:

One player pitches the **Unusual Thing** a character might say or do in this situation. They say something like:

Normally, I'd assume/expect [character] to do, say, think, or feel [expected behavior], but instead they [something very different]

For example:

**Premise Prompt:** Wrong thing to say or do in this situation.

**Player 1:** Normally, I would expect the dying cadet to be focused on survival. But instead, he stops the captain from killing the snake: "Captain... cough... captain, don't harm the snake. We can't hurt this cute little guy."

The other player **Justifies** the unusual thing:

**Player 2:** The cadet is a passionate conservationist who loves animals and wants to protect nature. "Captain, this snake is beautiful. We can't come to this planet and disrupt the natural ecosystem."

We keep going until each player has pitched an unusual thing.

**Step 3: Heighten the premise.** Everyone takes turns pitching absurd moments from this scene, specific examples of the unusual behavior. Describe something that happens, or say a line of dialogue as one of the characters. Each time, try to make the unusual behavior even more unusual. Keep following the same pattern, make it progressively more absurd.

**Heightening 1:** Cadet shields the snake with his body. "My fate is sealed, captain. I may be dying, but I won't be responsible for killing the snake. What if we drive this majestic species to extinction?"

**Heightening 2:** "Captain, hand me my journal, I must draw it! Look at these beautiful suckers! I bet there isn't a single space snake in the whole universe with the suckers just like these!"

**Heightening 3:** He pets the snake. "Awww, look! I can already feel it gnawing on my bone and trying to suck out my bone marrow. How did this little guy even know how to do that? Who's my little perfect killing machine! Who holds my leg in its slimy death grip? You are, yes you are!"

**Step 4.** Improvise the scene. Two players take the sketch outline the group has brainstormed, and improvise it as a scene.

Decide who's the Comic Character and who's the Normal Character. Establish the Base Reality in the first couple of lines, introduce the Unusual Thing, Justify it, Heighten it a few times, end the scene once you've made it as absurd as you can.

## 5. FULL IMPROV SCENES

Finally, we put everything we've learned together by improvising the complete comedy sketches.

### EXERCISE: IMPROVISE A COMEDY SKETCH

Someone suggests a location prompt, and two players improvise the entire scene, following the steps we have learned.

- Establish the **Base Reality** in the first couple of lines.
- Introduce the **Unusual Thing** - say or do something unexpected.
- **Justify** the Unusual Thing - explain why it makes sense from your character's perspective.
- **Heighten** the Unusual Thing 3-4 times - if this is true, what else is true?
- End the scene once you've made it as absurd as you can.

## PREMISE PROMPTS

Use the following prompts to help you come up with ideas for Unusual Things.

1. Confession or accusation of doing something ridiculous.

"Honey, I've been meaning to tell you... I bought us a lizard." "Bro, why did you shave my dog?"

2. A wrong thing to say or do in this situation.

Space captain gives a corporate-sounding TED talk before the battle, a torturer keeps apologizing for the whole process, a survivor bitten by a zombie tries to hide it, an airplane pilot wonders over the intercom whether life is worth living, a hostage begins bossing around her captors.

3. Behavior or attitude that is out of place in this scene.

Pitching startup idea at a funeral, making awkward small talk during a bank robbery, asking for a divorce on a roller coaster, doing stretches before a duel to the death.

4. Wildly inappropriate response, weird or unusual reaction.

Haggling with your mugger, being annoyed about getting rescued from a tower, trying to flirt your way out of getting a detention, vampire asks the legendary vampire hunter for autographs, an eldritch snake god acts uncomfortable and disturbed when his worshippers offer him a human sacrifice.

5. Unexpected behavior or activity for this character.

A pirate files his taxes, birthday magician performs exorcism, Zeus takes anger management classes, a kid dreams of becoming an investment banker, angels are quietly trash-talking Jesus, Hamburglar tries to cover up his first murder.

6. Exaggerated, inappropriate, or disproportionate emotion.

Person 1: "I bought a pie."  
Person 2 (places hand over mouth): "OH MY GOD."

7. Strong opinion, unusual belief or philosophy.

A pirate captain who thinks maps are cheating, "Weekends are a for the weak!", "Locking doors is rude."

8. Unexpected characteristic or personality trait for this character.

Hillbilly vampire, superstitious lawyer, thief who acts like a suburban mom, "spiritual but not religious" monk, heart surgeon with an attitude of a hairdresser, millennial pirate, evil lunch lady.

9. A character who does not belong in this situation.

Caveman in a courtroom, real estate agent tours a haunted house, motivational speaker in a call center, a ghost haunts a Starbucks, fortune teller works at the IRS, a superhero and their nemesis go to couples therapy.