

THE FIRST MEETING

Once you have acquired some costumes and props and have gotten the word out, it's time for your first meeting. Chances are, a few students will be nervous, not knowing what it's all about. So you may want to start with a few "ice breaker" theater games to get the ball rolling.

Ice Breakers

1. Instant Commercial: Choose a random item from the surprise bag. Decide on your product's name.

How will it improve your customers' lives? How/where can they buy it? How much does it cost? Add typical dialogue like "But wait, there's more!" and "Operators are standing by" to come up with a funny sales pitch. Then star in your own commercial.

2. Long Lost Relative: Have everyone stand in one line and mark off each pair. Have each pair greet each other as if he or she is a long lost, deeply loved relative who just returned home.

3. Comedy Monologue: I keep a box of joke books on hand for this exercise. Each of them has a specific subject matter, i.e., Thanksgiving jokes, school cafeteria jokes, etc. Have students pick out a book and ask them to string together the best six or eight jokes for a quickie stand-up monologue. Provide a fake microphone and suggest adding typical comedian dialogue like, "It's great to be here tonight," and "You've been a great audience."

4. Mirror, Mirror: This is a pantomime exercise. That is, acting without speaking. Pair off with someone and decide what mirrored actions to do. One of you will be the actor and the other will be his or her "reflection." Try to maintain eye contact instead of watching your partner's body movements. Choose one of these or make up your own:

- A. Arm or leg motions, varying speed. Then wave goodbye to each other.
- B. Pretend to get dressed, wash up, put on make-up (if girls), and comb your hair.
- C. Perform simple calisthenics and flex muscles afterward.
- D. Make faces in the "mirror."
- E. Pretend to wash a window. Examine it closely in spots to make sure it's clean.

5. Other Pantomimes: Have students act out (without speaking) any of the following activities:

- A. Walking on hot coals, or on a tightrope.
- B. Trying to sleep when someone's making noise.
- C. Smelling something disgusting.
- D. Eating something that tastes awful.
- E. Watching a scary movie when you're all alone.

After an ice breaker or two, announce what Comedy Club is all about: A chance to perform skits, meet new friends, and share some laughs. It's best to start with an easy skit with maybe three lines of dialogue per character. You will, of course, have made copies of the script ahead of time, highlighting the dialogue and/or stage directions for each character. It's hard to know how many will show up at the first meeting so make enough copies for several teams to play the same script. In a perfect world, an assistant will be on hand to direct each team.

This is an ideal time to teach students how to project their voices. Essentially, the sound must come from deep within the diaphragm rather than the throat. Have them take a deep breath and focus on their diaphragm while saying a few words of their choice loud and clear.

Better yet, provide a book of tongue twisters and have them practice projecting their voices with a few of them. That's always good for a laugh! Allow each student to practice one at a time and have volunteers move further away to help the speaker see how far the sound needs to travel.

After this mini-workshop, it's time to hand out the scripts to your team and conduct a Readers' Theater. By that, I mean the script is read aloud with each player speaking his or her highlighted parts. Depending on the age, maturity, and reading level of the students, you will likely need to repeat this step three or four times.

It's also a good opportunity to tell them how you envision the characters. Show them how the old man walks a little stooped over. Maybe the bad guy swaggers with confidence or walks with a limp. Act out the impatient store clerk's bad attitude with crossed arms and rolling eyeballs. Give a French accent to your chef or a southern twang to your heroine. Encourage students to draw on their own experiences to make the characters seem real.

Try to find ways to incorporate their suggestions into the skit so that it becomes theirs and not yours. I asked for the students' input to help name a character and received a whole lot of interesting ideas!

After the members have gotten a feel for the story and know when to speak, it's time to rehearse. Use the "setting" directions in the script to place characters on your stage or have them waiting "in the wings" for their entrance. The rehearsal is not only for practicing the skit but also for hashing out the details. At this point, players should still use their scripts for stage directions as well as dialogue. As the players move through the script, you (and they!) will see where changes need to be made. Maybe it would work better, for instance, if the butler entered from stage right instead of stage left. Wherever feasible, incorporate your students' suggestions so they feel like they're part of the process.

Repeat the rehearsal as often as time allows until the skit flows smoothly and players can perform it without a script. As I tell my students, the fun part (costumes and props!) comes AFTER they learn their lines.

Excitement steps up a notch after costumes and props are handed out. This is the perfect time to take a cast photo. For a large group, have the taller students kneel in front and the shorter ones stand behind them. We had two waitresses for "Soup Opera," so I had each of them lean an elbow on the customers' café table with the customers seated and the rest of the cast standing behind. You may even incorporate a scene from the skit. Because the stars of

“Juleo and Romiet” shake hands in one scene, I had them do so for the cast picture as well.