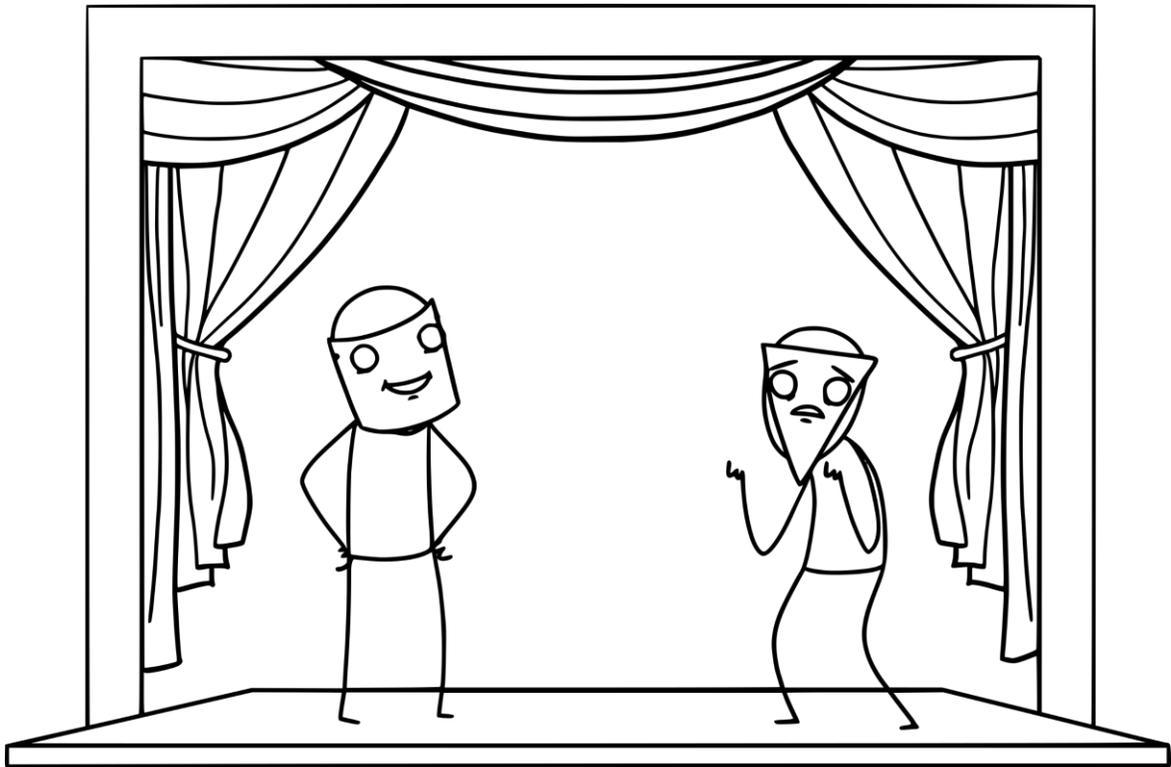


# playwriting with young people

the essentials

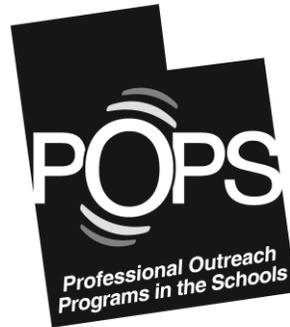


written by Julie Jensen

illustrated by Andrew Livingston

Meets Utah Core State Standards for Drama  
grades K-6: Create and Perform Strands

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Special thanks to Penelope Caywood  
and Youth Theatre at the University of Utah

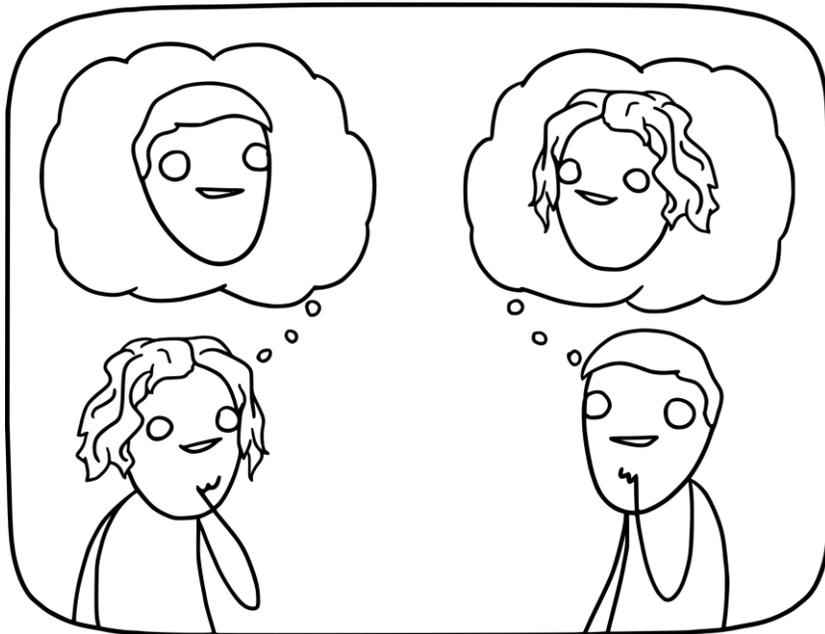
## WHY WE DO THEATRE

Theatre is a wonderful art form. It helps us understand other people, what motivates them, how they think.

It also helps us see ourselves, as we imagine what we might do and remember what we have done.

Theatre broadens our experiences. We get a chance to live through other events in a safe and manageable setting.

It's also great fun! Childhood games are full of role-playing. Who doesn't enjoy getting inside someone else's mind, speaking like them, acting like them, trying to get what they want?



This little booklet contains a set of exercises designed to introduce young people to the theatre. Students are invited to make theatre themselves by using improvisation.

These exercises are only a roadmap. You're encouraged to explore on your own, to use these skills and this technique in different ways, as an augmentation to stories, as a way of understanding difficult concepts, as a way of bringing history to life. In other words, feel free to add, change, extend. Improvise yourselves. No end in sight!

Oops, one more thing. There is an end in sight, after all. It's the teacher's job, at least initially, to stop an improvisation. The students won't know when to call it quits. Just say

“Scene!” And that will mean this scene is completed. At first, a good scene might take no more than five to ten lines. Later, as the students gain more experience, they might be able to make bigger scenes. But that should not be the goal. You’ll find that shorter scenes are usually more effective.

So now, off we go!

## INTRODUCTION TO IMPROVISATION

Teachers frequently read stories to their students. Let's say that today the teacher is reading "Little Red Riding Hood." The teacher stops to ask questions at the point where Little Red first meets the wolf: What does the wolf want? How does he get Little Red to go off the path and pick flowers? What do you think the wolf says to her? What does Little Red want? What do you think Little Red says to the wolf?

We imagine ourselves in the situation. We pretend that we are the characters. And we say what we think they would say. That's improvisation!

When you think about it, you use improvisation all the time. When you're playing with your friend, and you pretend that you are one character and your friend is another, that's improvisation. When you're trying to find your little brothers, you might first imagine where they were, what they were doing, and what they wanted. That's using improvisation.

It comes naturally to us. It's easy and fun. It helps us understand a story better. It helps us understand other people. What's best about improvisation is that there are no right or wrong answers. All ideas are welcome.



## SETTING UP AN IMPROVISATION

As we've already learned, improvisation means that people put themselves into an imaginary situation and say what comes to mind. In this method of working, there are no right or wrong answers. It's like brainstorming. All ideas are valuable.

Using "Little Red Riding Hood," let's set up an improvisation.

First we ask who are the characters? The answer is that one is a wolf, the other is a young girl. Next we ask, where are they? Answer: they're on a path in the woods. And finally, we ask, what do they want? The answer is that the wolf wants the girl to leave the path, and the girl wants to obey her mother and stay on the path.

There. The improvisation is set up.

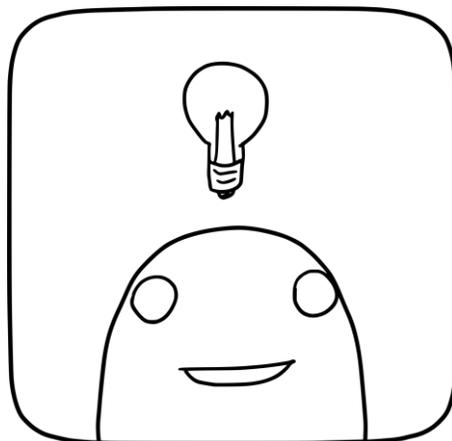
Then we ask the most important question, what do the characters do to get what they want? This question will be answered in the improvisation itself.

And so, we ask two students to participate, one playing Little Red and the other playing the wolf. They will improvise dialogue that could occur between the girl and the wolf.

Remember that there are no right and wrong answers. To prove this point, ask two more students to improvise the same scene and see how the two scenes differ.

Improvisation can also be used to make a new play. And that is the method we will use in this unit on playwriting.

Let's get started.



## CHARACTERS ALWAYS WANT SOMETHING

As we move on to plays we make ourselves, new plays, we will be working from our own experiences rather than other people's stories. For these plays, we'll be dealing with characters, because the people in plays are called characters.

Just like people we know, characters always want something. And they want different things. In the story of "Little Red Riding Hood," the wolf wants Little Red to go off the path, so he can eat her grandmother, then eat her. But Little Red wants to obey her mother and stay on the path.

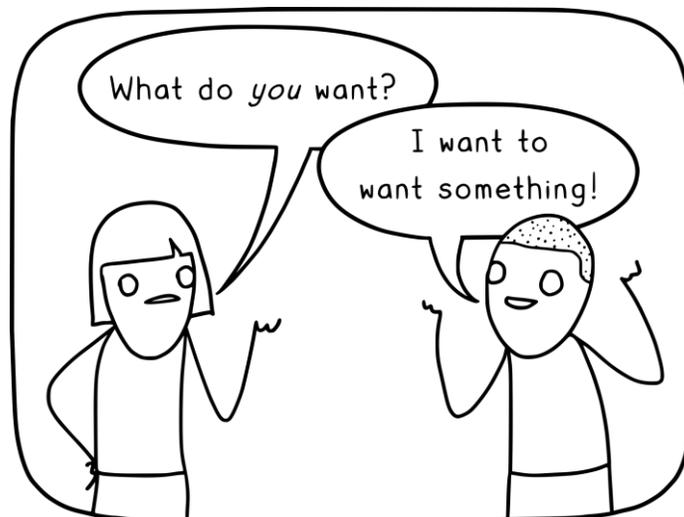
Now let's think about the kinds of things characters want. A character named Mario wants to get even. Another character named Tina stole his lunch. Good beginning. Now think about what Tina wants. Maybe she wants to prove she's innocent.

Improvise a scene where these two characters shout at one another in front of everyone in the lunchroom.

Now let's imagine some other character wants. Shawn wants Jenny to do his math homework. How does he ask her? What does Jenny want? What does she say? Improvise this scene.

Or what if Calvin wants LaTisha to help him get across the ditch. Will she? What will Calvin say to convince her? What will LaTisha say?

Remember that all characters have to want something. That's the first and most important thing about making new plays.



## CHARACTERS ARE IN CONFLICT

Because characters always want something and because characters usually want different things, characters are in conflict with someone or something. Remember that the wolf and Little Red were in conflict in that story. The wolf wanted her to go off the path and pick flowers, but Little Red wanted to obey her mother. That's an example of conflict.

Here are some other possibilities of conflict: a young girl is in conflict with her sister, a boy is in conflict with his father, a boy in conflict with his friend.

Can you imagine a conflict between a girl and her sister? What might they disagree about? What does each character want? Then improvise this scene. Can you imagine a boy in conflict with his father? What would they argue about? Improvise the scene. What might a boy and his friend fight about? Improvise this scene.

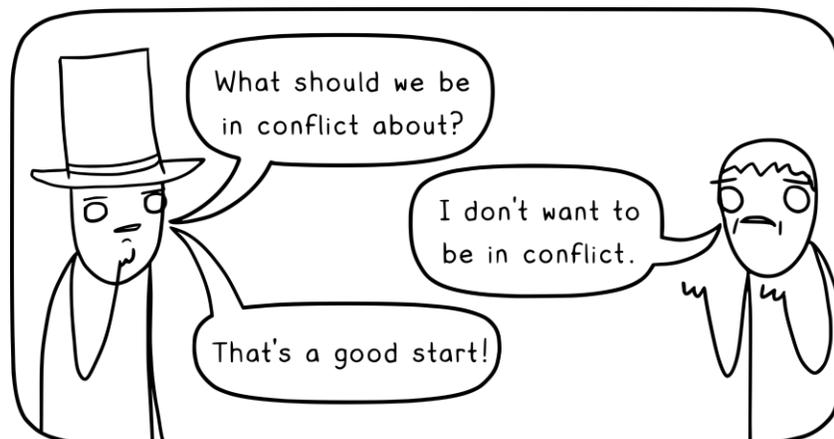
Now let's consider some other kinds of conflict. What about a girl named Marina in conflict with the rules? At her school, if students are late, they must go to the principal's office to explain their reason. What would Marina say? What would the principal say?

Try it!

This is a conflict between a boy and time. Let's say that Raul has to meet his bus at 7:30, but his sister won't let him in the bathroom. They have a big argument. What do they say?

Finally, let's think about a girl named Anita in conflict with herself. In other words, she wants something and also doesn't want it. An example of this kind of conflict is Little Red. She wants to obey her mother and stay on the path, but she also wants to get off the path to pick flowers for her grandmother.

Have you ever had a conflict like that, where you wanted to obey and also to disobey? Improvise a scene where Anita argues with herself.



## HOW CHARACTERS GET WHAT THEY WANT

Characters use different tactics to get what they want. Olivia wants to go out with her friends. Her mother asks if she has finished her homework. She hasn't. She has to convince her mother to let her go anyway. How does she do that?

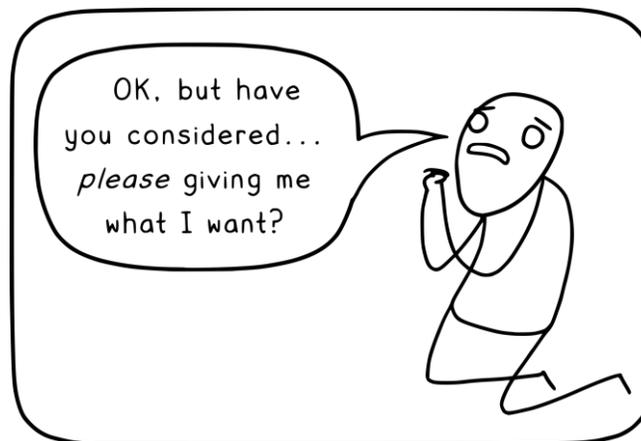
Riku wants the dollar his brother Haru is waving around. Haru says no. Riku threatens him. Improvise that scene.

Or Riku argues with Haru to get the money. He gives Haru three reasons why he needs the money. Improvise this scene.

Or Riku insults his brother to get the money. Improvise this scene.

Another tactic used by some characters is avoidance. Gina thinks her friend Rachel took her new book. Gina asks her about it, but Rachel keeps changing the subject. Try an improvisation of this scene.

There are hundreds of tactics used by characters to get what they want. You might think about your own tactics. When you want something in the store, for example, how do you try to convince your mother that you should have it? Do you want to improvise that?



## CHARACTERS ALL HAVE PERSONALITIES

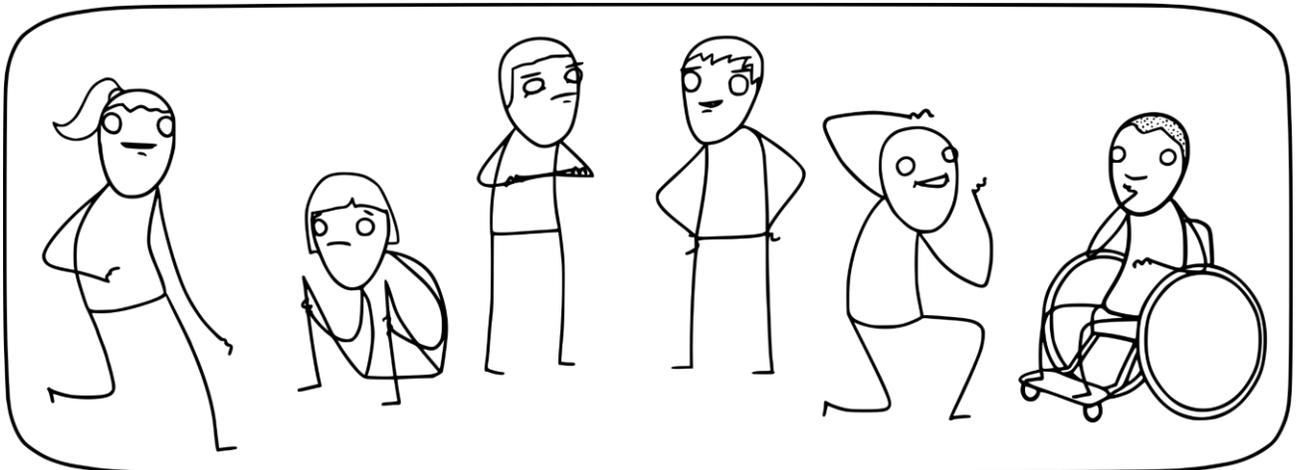
Just like the people we know, characters are different from one another. They have different personalities.

Let's say that Isabella wants Lucia to come over to her house, but Isabella is a shy person. Lucia is older and more confident. She doesn't know Isabella. How would Isabella get what she wants?

Now imagine Clay, who is arrogant, full of himself. He and Mitchell are on the same soccer team. They have to sell oranges to raise money for new uniforms. Clay wants Mitchell to sell his oranges and Clay's, too. Mitchell wants Clay to get away from him. How might this scene go?

Keesha is in the classroom. She is feeling sad because her mother is sick. Pedro comes in. He is a funny guy. He wants to make Keesha laugh. Improvise this scene.

Esperanza wants to be on the soccer team. But she's young and she hasn't played very long. LaToya is the coach. She is always busy and preoccupied, it seems. How does Esperanza talk with LaToya about joining the team?

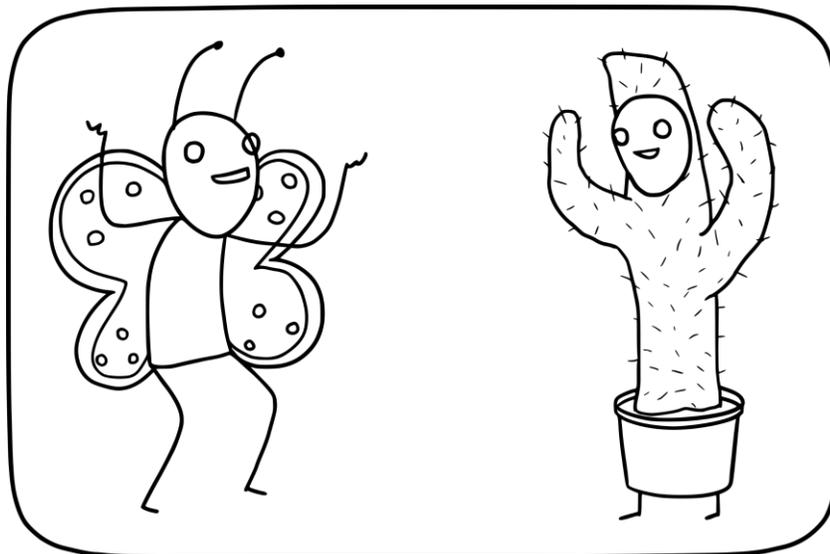


## CHARACTERS DON'T HAVE TO BE PEOPLE

It's a great idea to make characters that are not people. For example, an animal, like a mouse or a dog—or even a giraffe—can make a great character. You can also make a character from a plant such as a tree, a rose, or a weed. Insects make excellent characters because they are so funny-looking. How about a mosquito, a fly, or a wasp? Finally, you might also make a character from an object, such as a chair, a glove, a stone.

The possibilities are endless!

So off you go! Set up some improvisations between characters that are not people. Decide what each character wants and where they are. Then improvise what they do to get what they want. Let's see some great scenes between unlikely characters!



## WHAT CHARACTERS SAY AND HOW THEY SAY IT

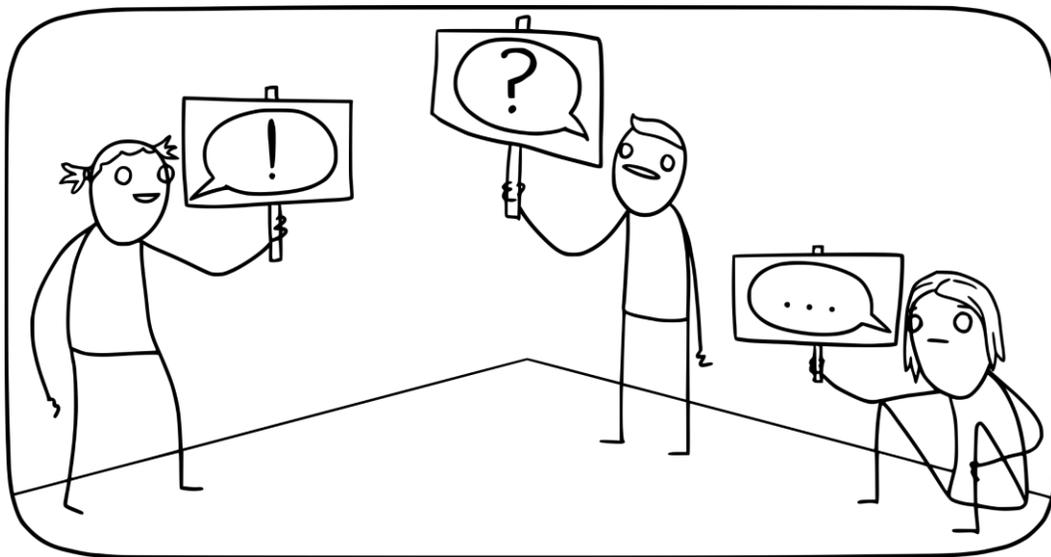
What characters say in a play is dialogue. You can tell a lot about a person by what they say and how they say it. The same is true of characters.

For example, age affects how people speak and what they say. Think about how an old person speaks. Compare that with how a small child talks. Teenagers do not speak like their parents.

Try an improvisation with two characters of different ages. Don't forget that all characters, no matter their age, still have wants. Let's see what you come up with!

Emotions, or how a character is feeling, also affect their dialogue. Think about how your mother sounds when she's angry and compare that to how she sounds when she's excited. How does the neighbor kid speak when they're scared? How does your friend sound when they're sad? Or maybe a character is bored. How would that affect their dialogue?

Now let's try it. There are two characters, both of whom have wants, except they are affected by different emotions. Improvise something wonderful!



## WHERE THE CHARACTERS ARE

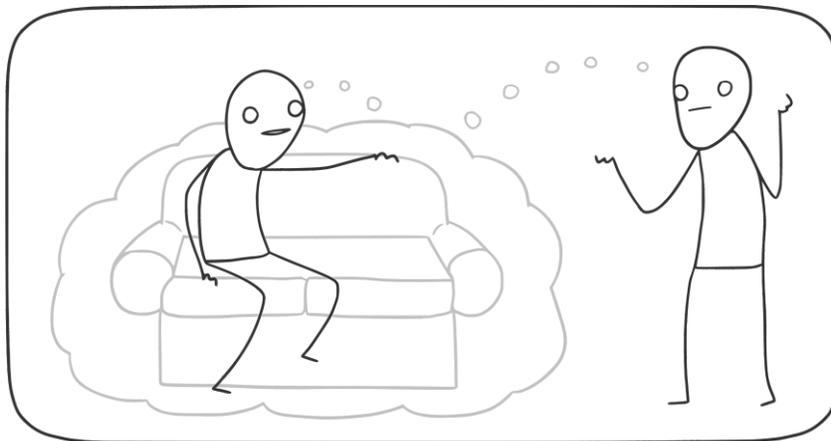
Where the play takes place is the setting. What is on the stage is a set. Individual items on the set are set pieces. In general, we try not to use more than one setting in a play, because changing the set can be difficult and time-consuming.

Some plays are set in public places, meaning that other people might overhear or walk in. Here are some examples of public places that could be the setting for a play: playground, café, street corner, library, front porch.

Let's imagine a scene that takes place in a playground. Let's say it's between two girls, Marcie and Angel. Marcie wants to climb on the monkey bars, but Angel is already there, and she won't move. What tactics will Marcie use to get what she wants? Do a great improvisation.

When we think about it, some plays use private settings, where no one else is likely to overhear or walk in. Here are some examples of private settings: a bedroom, a backyard, a garage, a forest, inside a car.

Think about the kinds of scenes that might be set inside a car. Let's say Paula has handed in some school work that was not hers. The teacher has talked to her mother about it. Now Paula and her mother are driving, and her mother is angry at Paula. She wants Paula to think up a punishment for herself. Try an improvisation on that subject.



In a play, some objects or set pieces are necessary; others can be imagined. If a play takes place on a playground, for example, what set pieces might you use? How could you use your imagination to make the set? What set pieces would be necessary? Likewise, in the scene in the car, you don't need to bring a whole car on stage. What could you use to

make the car? What things could be imagined? How about the rearview mirror? What about the steering wheel? What about the safety belts?

It's fun to think up interesting settings for plays. It's good to imagine which set pieces would be necessary and which would not. "Little Red Riding Hood" has an interesting setting. If you wanted to show that the characters were in a forest, how might you do that? How would you show that there were flowers along the path? How would you show that the path is winding?

## WHAT CHARACTERS DO

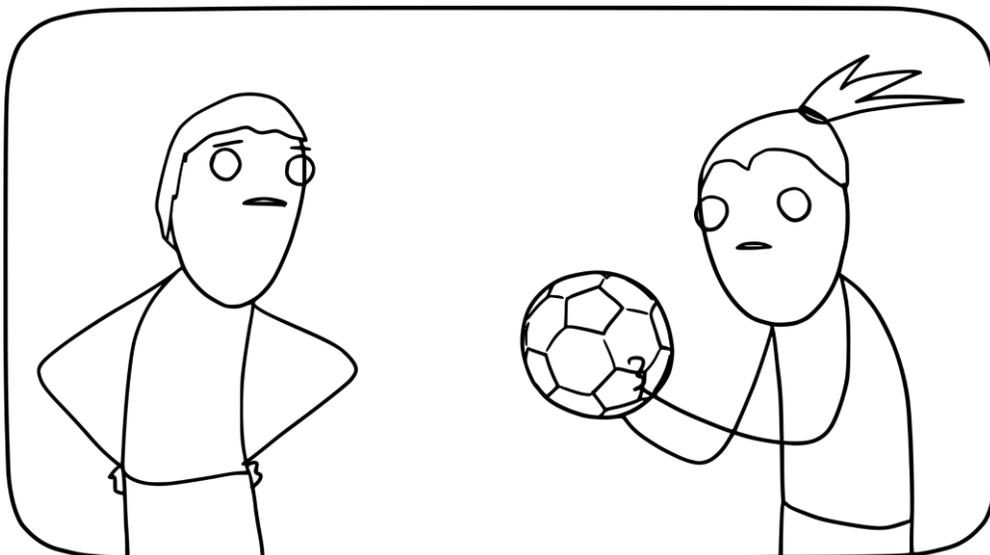
What the characters do is the plot. The plot always answers a question. The question is simple, and it's always the same one: will the main character get what they want?

While trying for what they want, characters encounter obstacles. Maybe it's someone else's wishes, or perhaps something important has been forgotten. On the other hand, what if someone more powerful gets in the way, or something unexpected comes up?

Let's try improvising a scene in which Marco wants to be goalie on the soccer team, but Ricky wants Anna to be goalie. How will they solve it? In this scene Anna is used as an obstacle. Think about how Marco and Ricky will go after what they want. What tactics will they use? And will Marco get what he wants?

Shaneeeka wants Manuela to be her friend. She has invited her home. They get to Shaneeka's house, but they can't get in. The key is gone. What will they do? In this scene, the absent key is an obstacle. And will Shaneeka get what she wants?

Longer plays have more obstacles. Shorter plays have fewer obstacles. And that's the difference. So, let's work on a play with two obstacles. Decide on two characters. Decide what they want, then pick out a couple of obstacles for them to deal with. Improvise that longer scene. Does the main character get what they want? We will know at the end of the improvisation, won't we?



## SOMETHING ABOUT ENDINGS

When you think about a book you liked or a movie you enjoyed, you'll probably say something about the ending, because endings are important, no question. At first, finding an ending for a scene will be hard. Later, with experience, endings will come easier. The most important thing about an ending is that it answers the question: does the main character get what they want?

But there are other tricks. Maybe the end is funny and the play ends with a punch line. Maybe the end is sad, and there is simply nothing more to say. Maybe the ending is unexpected and therefore a surprise to both the characters and the audience.

When you finish a scene, think together about whether it seems to have concluded. Are there other possible endings? Try to improvise other endings, maybe even several endings for the same situation.

Try to end well, that's the best advice. And make sure we know it's the end.

Finally, let's add one more step: to write down the plays we make up. Most plays are written down so that other people can perform them. The same is true of our plays, they should be available for others.

When you write, think of it like improvising. Change things, invent new things. That's how improvising goes, and it's also how writing goes.

Happy writing!

