

Introduction

This pack contains games and exercises for Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and GCSE drama students. The activities are ideal for:

- stand-alone workshop or improvisation exercises
- providing a scheme of work for exploring text
- directing the school play.

The pack aims to give the student the skills to turn text into performance by:

- physically playing around with the text
- being adventurous with the text in a practical way
- taking responsibility for their own learning and their own performance.

The pack encourages students to:

- enunciate text with volume, clarity and definition
- engage physically with text
- interpret text in a creative and imaginative way
- act in an energetic, lively, committed and varied way
- understand text and communicate meaning to an audience.

What is *Playing with Text*?

'Playing with text' means using games and exercises to experiment and improvise with script. In simple terms, you take a piece of learnt text and play about with it. The process involves rehearsing and trying out the text in as many different ways as possible. In this way, the student can discover a wide range of ways to speak the lines, move on stage and act as the character. The approach is suitable for drama lessons and for the school play.

The wonderful thing about drama is that there are no right answers, just a variety of approaches that allow us to get at the truths and the meaning in the text. For example, there are many ways of speaking Hamlet's line, 'To be or not to be, that is the question': What is the right accent? What is the right volume? Is it to be whispered? Shouted? Where are the stresses? The pauses? Is it thoughtful? Purposeful?

There are any number of perfectly 'correct' ways. And that is just one line: what about the rest of the play, how should the actor speak those lines? How should the actor move? Rather than telling students how to say lines, it is much better and more efficient if we encourage them to find out for themselves.

If you perform the text in 50 different ways, you might just find the best and most interesting way of performing it. This is the essence of *Playing with Text*.

The Manuel game

This game is named after the Spanish waiter in the television series *Fawlty Towers* who always says 'Qué?' – the Spanish for 'What?'.

How to play

This game works on several levels:

- 1 Actor A asks a simple question in normal speech and Actor B replies "What?"
- 2 More slowly, and with greater enunciation, Actor A asks the same question again: Actor B replies "What?"
- 3 Even more slowly and with even greater enunciation, Actor A asks the same question again: Actor B replies "What?"
- 4 Even more slowly, with even greater enunciation and with emphasis on each syllable and consonant, Actor A asks the same question again: Actor B replies "What?"
- 5 Excruciatingly slowly, with even greater enunciation and with even greater emphasis on each syllable and consonant, Actor A asks the same question again: Actor B replies "What?"

Procedure

- Teach the game to the students using a simple phrase, eg "Excuse me, can you tell me the way to the railway station?"
- Take a section of learnt text and rehearse it at level one of the Manuel game.
- Repeat the rehearsal at each level of the game.

Notes

This game is an exercise in playing at varying levels of speed and diction. It is designed to help with enunciation and speed of delivery. It also develops an awareness that speech is for communication. The game gives the teacher and the students a shared vocabulary. When addressing the pace of speech, it can be useful to use the game as a frame of reference. For example, when an actor is underplaying vocally they can be asked to play at a higher level of the game. This exercise is useful both as a warm-up exercise and as a vehicle to play with the text. If student actors are speaking too quickly and are not enunciating, revisit the game.

Mime

Aim

Take a section of learnt text and rehearse it as if it is a mime. Dispense with speaking the text altogether.

Preparation

This exercise is designed to establish focus and raise physical awareness.

- 1 The group relaxes by lying on their backs on the floor.
- 2 The teacher counts slowly from one to ten. During the count the group rises slowly so that by the count of ten they are standing up straight.
- 3 The exercise is repeated backwards. The group lies down to the count of ten.
- 4 The exercise is repeated until the group has mastered rising from and returning to the floor smoothly to a count of ten.
- 5 The group rises and stands tall. The teacher now helps each member of the group to define their space. The idea is that each member of the group is cocooned in a kind of tight, flexible skin; they cannot move until they have pushed the skin out of the way.
- 6 The teacher starts with the head: each group member has to find out slowly how far they can move their heads, all the time pushing against the pressure of the imagined skin. The rest of the body keeps absolutely still.
- 7 Then the teacher asks the group to move, in turn, their shoulders, elbows, arms, hands and fingers. How far can they be moved against the pressure of the imagined skin?
- 8 The teacher then takes the group through moving the whole body until each person has defined their space.

Procedure

As you rehearse the learnt text, try to mime each speech. Without using words, communicate the sense of the speech to the other actors.

Notes

This exercise makes the students focus on having to communicate physically. It is good for giving actors a sense of the shape and the events of the play without learning the words.

The stick game

Aim

Take a section of learnt text for two actors and rehearse it with both actors holding opposite ends of the same stick.

How to play

You will need a cane or dowel about a metre in length.

- 1 With a partner, both hold the cane using the tip of the forefinger of the leading hand (ie the right hand if you are right-handed and the left if you are left-handed).
- 2 Move around the room while holding the cane, which must not be allowed to fall to the ground. If one actor moves, the other has to follow.
- 3 Try to sit or lie down without dropping the cane.
- 4 While moving, have a conversation about the weather.

Notes

If one character is dominant at any point in the text they should try to push the stick towards their partner. This is an excellent exercise for exploring movement in an argument. Try it with Katharina and Petruchio in a scene from *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Who am I talking to?

Aim

Take a section of learnt text and touch the character you are addressing every time you speak.

Procedure

As you rehearse the learnt text, remember the following:

- Every time you speak a line, you must hold the person you are speaking to.
- If you are speaking to more than one person, you should try to hold as many of the listeners as you can.
- If you are speaking to the audience, you should come as far downstage as you can.

Notes

This exercise is useful at the beginning of a rehearsal period, when introducing a new script. It is sometimes difficult for student actors to understand that the dialogue in a play is spoken to a particular character or characters rather than to the world in general. In some plays it is difficult in the first read-through for the actors to figure out exactly who they are talking to.

Fault	Cure
The actors are too quiet.	Rehearse the play: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in the style of the Wild West (page 12) • in the style of a horror film (page 13) • as if it is a musical (page 17) • at different volumes (page 18).
Everyone has got bored with the play; rehearsals have become just a little tedious. Time to inject some fun and experimentation.	Rehearse the play in the style of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a murder mystery (page 8) • a spy film (page 10) • a gangster film (page 11) • a <i>Mills and Boon</i> love story (page 12) • a science fiction film (page 14). Rehearse using a variety of accents (page 15). Dance the play (page 27). Play a tag game while rehearsing (page 28).
The actors do not know what to do with their hands.	Rehearse while playing the signing game (page 21). Start with exaggerated signing then set the level of signing to suit the play.
You are doing a stylised play such as a pantomime, a farce or Shakespeare and the actors are making gestures which are too small for the play, or the actors are over-gesturing a naturalistic play.	Teach the right size game (page 25) and then instruct the actors to act with a larger or smaller 'paintbrush' when they rehearse.
The actors are acting without any sense of emotional drive for their characters.	Rehearse the text: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • with a range of different emotional states (page 29) • playing one emotion at a time (page 29) • while playing an emotional gradient (page 29) • using emotion and number cards (page 31).
The actors are not communicating emotion and feeling to the audience and to other actors.	Rehearse the play with the informal audience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • guessing the emotion (page 31) • guessing the level (page 31) • guessing the emotion and the level (page 31).