

*USING IMPROV COMEDY TECHNIQUES*

# IMPROV(E) YOUR CONVERSATIONS

THINK  
ON YOUR  
FEET, WITTY  
BANTER, AND  
ALWAYS KNOW  
WHAT TO SAY

PATRICK KING



# Improv(e) Your Conversations:

**Think on Your Feet, Witty Banter, and  
Always Know What To Say with Improv  
Comedy Techniques**

By Patrick King

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## **Introduction**

How many people can you name that can do passable, if not flat-out hilarious, impersonations of Janet Reno, George W. Bush, Alex Trebek, and Robert Goulet?

There is only one man who possesses the talent to do such a thing: Will Ferrell.

For those that are unfamiliar with Will Ferrell, he is a stand-up comedian, actor, and improv comic that was one of the primary drivers of Saturday Night Live's (SNL) revival during the 1990s. He was able to parlay his exposure at SNL into a comedic movie career to rival that of any of the greats.

He was also one of the first performers that was an "automatic" for me. What do I mean by that?

It means that anything he released, acted in, or was involved in, I would without question automatically watch it. I'd buy it, rent it, or watch it in the theater on opening day because no matter the subject matter, I had faith that he was going to make it bearable at the very worst.



Whether he was the second coming of laughter itself, or his mannerisms just resonated with my personal sense of humor, Will Ferrell was one of my early role models and my first “man-crush” during my impressionable years.

Years ago, I learned that he got his start in the comedy world through improv comedy, as did many of today’s household names in comedy. If I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my man-crush, then I obviously needed to investigate improv comedy as well! I excitedly signed up for a weekend workshop.

As a dating coach and conversation coach now, you would think that I had a good foundation at the time. I sure didn’t think I would have a hard time, but I was sorely mistaken. There were many similarities between improv comedy and what I teach, but the paths were starkly different to reach the similar goal of a great interaction. Where I tended to want to make conversation more predictable and easy for the participants, improv comedy teaches you to deal with, and even embrace, the opposite: total and complete chaos that somehow turns hilarious due to the quick thinking of talented performers.

As you might expect, I had somewhat more mixed results than Mr. Ferrell, but the workshop left me with a strong impression of how to consciously ignore all the chatter in the world and focus on the person in front of me. It’s something that sounds so simple in hindsight, but is nearly impossible to do in practice.

For me, that meant letting go of my own self-consciousness and any agenda I had coming into the interaction since there was no guarantee it would ever come up, and I had to work with what the other person gave me. I would have an answer prepared in my head, but the moment I spoke it I realized that

it derailed what the entire interaction was building toward because I wasn't listening properly.

Improv comedy is a group dance that ebbs and flows with what each member of the group is doing. The only rule is that the group must always stay and work together. Even if you're uncomfortable or unfamiliar with what's happening, you'll be supported and helped by the other members of the group because you are all collaborating toward one shared goal and nothing else matters.

I always intended to take more improv comedy workshops, but for one reason or another, I never got around to. My bid to become Will Ferrell's successor was destined to fall short.

However, the weekend workshop wasn't a waste of time; far from it.

It occurred to me that even though improv comedy represented a different approach, there were a tremendous amount of elements I could implement in normal social interactions. For one, they both have the exact same goal of a great interaction – a conversation for my context, and a performance for the comedy context. Many other elements I taught clients about social interaction such as conversation, thinking on their feet, and witty banter – they were all intimately similar to the lessons I learned in improv comedy.

Improv comedy above all else teaches the concept of *flow*, which bestows the ability to make something out of nothing. A conversation always has a flow, you just have to pay attention to it and catch it before it fades.

You have to observe, listen, be present, react, and adapt to find the flow. In finding the flow, you create something that both

parties are happy with.

Not coincidentally, that is the same exact goal for conversations, and it's what I had in mind when I titled this book "Improv(e) Your Conversations". It's the application of principles integral to improv comedy to conversation, interaction, and connecting deeply with others.

Improv comedy principles have been honed and developed over decades to address the exact same issues that trip us up when we speak to strangers on a normal basis.

Eliminate awkward silences and make conversation flow smoothly?

Listen better, go deeper, and connect effortlessly?

Verbally banter and spar without having to think about what to say?

Ditch self-consciousness and put yourself into unfamiliar situations?

Check, check, check, and check.

I want to take this opportunity to help you discover how and why improv comedy actors never run out of things to say, think supremely quick on their feet, and give the best witty banter in the world.



## Chapter 1. Improvisation Implementation

Great conversations don't simply appear spontaneously out of thin air. We might get lucky occasionally when we find people that happen to be on the same wavelength as us, or share an obscure set of similarities, but that's not something you can depend on to carry you through life.

That's like trying to predict when and where lightning will strike, which isn't exactly known to be possible.

People who can create flowing conversations with just about everyone they meet are definitely doing something different and special. What do people that can make something out of nothing have in common?

It doesn't happen consistently without planning and preparation. It's not planning and preparation in the conventional sense, where you might jot down ideas of topics to bring up, or dig through the news for the current events of the day. Those are important to some degree, but they can be equally as detrimental. If you have a flowchart for conversations, any slight deviation can spell your doom.

The type of preparation you need is to understand the basic anatomy of great conversations. That's going to be the focus of

this first chapter of “Improve Your Conversations”. What are the elements you should focus on and try to seek in your conversations, and what should you try to avoid? Moreover, which of the bad habits are you guilty of, and are you compelling others to *want* to converse with you, or are you actually repelling them?

A great conversation greatly resembles an improv comedy performance, and ideally should involve all of the rules that I’m going to cover in this book.

Let’s spell out the similarities.

Both a conversation and an improv comedy performance involve parties who can’t read each other’s minds. They are both unpredictable situations because you just never know what is going to come out of someone’s mouth.

Both situations have the same goal of creating a pleasurable interaction – the conversation for the participants, and the improv comedy performance for the audience. Both situations require collaboration and listening to create a dialogue, otherwise it’s just two people reciting monologues to each other, or speaking over each other.

Finally, both situations are *fragile*. As you well know from your own experience, the wrong word, phrase, or question can instantly send a conversation into the toilet, and it’s the same for an improv comedy performance. One miscue or misread from the other performer, and a silence will consume the stage, leading the audience to realize that this was indeed an unplanned stumble.

If you’ve ever attended an improv comedy show, you’ll know that the performers often refer to themselves as players, just

like teammates on a sports team. This is not insignificant: it instantly frames what you see on stage as a collaborative effort where everyone is supporting everyone else for the common good.

If any of the players sense that someone needs support, they will instantly give it. They understand that the performance isn't about any one person in particular – it's about how the entire team does! The weakest link of the chain will never be allowed to falter, as everyone will pitch in the moment they sense trouble.

The players are extremely flexible and adaptable because they have no pre-set agenda or real purpose other than to work together with the other players successfully. What has been unspoken thus far is the absence of an ego, as an ego can completely sabotage and destroy what is being carefully created.

The improv players work together like cyclists, with the front cyclist taking his turn at the front of the line to absorb all of the wind resistance, then falling back and letting someone else pick up the slack. Of course, that would never work if someone's ego were to get in the way and they decided they were bigger than the team. The whole line would be disrupted and rendered useless.

If none of what I've described resembles how you've approached conversations or interactions up to this point in your life, it's time to re-evaluate your approach. Improv players spend years toiling away perfecting their craft, but we don't have to get to Will Ferrell's level to simply improve our conversations. We can greatly increase our wit, banter, and conversational intelligence simply by imagining a collaborative and accepting process.

Below, you'll read about some of the main tenets of improv comedy and how they apply to you off-stage.

## **Spontaneity and Flow**

Improv players don't come into a scene with an idea of how it's going to play out. Why not?

Because it's completely out of their control. They might be able to contribute to the path, but the rest is going to be spelled out by the other players whose minds they cannot read. Agendas, plans, and scripts are cast to the side and spontaneity and flow what are the most important.

It's necessary that they are open and comfortable with venturing into unknown territory, because any expectations will likely be completely unmet. They are comfortable with the fact that they won't know the outcome, and there will be a certain amount of uncertainty. This mindset alone is transformative in creating a sense of flexibility that gives life to great conversations.

If you go to a networking event with the idea of seeking a job, that's an expectation that will creep into all of your conversations, whether you realize it or not. You're going to subconsciously nudge your interactions into specific directions that will probably disrupt the natural flow of how they would otherwise go – to your detriment. If you speak to that same person and just seek to connect, chances are a very different connection would form.

When you come into a conversation with an agenda, it's not much different from a telemarketer reading from a script. You may have heard the other person respond to something, but it didn't fit your agenda so you ignored it and told your funny



story again. You don't listen, and are just waiting for your turn to speak instead of responding to them.

We can probably think of a few people off the top of our heads that do this all the time. They clearly have something they want to say, and aren't interested in hearing what you have to say. Would others include you in that category?

Flexibility and the ability to adapt are paramount to any great conversation.

## **Emotional Intelligence**

This is a term that is thrown around quite a bit, so let's define it for this context. Emotional intelligence is when you understand what someone is trying to convey through their words or body language, and you understand what you yourself are conveying to others through the same.

Only a small minority of people will outright state how they feel in a conversation or discussion. If it's a negative topic, then that small minority turns into a tiny fraction of a percentage since most people prefer to avoid confrontation whenever possible.

People generally don't tell others about their emotional state, or how they feel about topics of conversation. You'll rarely hear statements such as, "I am uncomfortable with this topic, but if you want to discuss this we can," or, "This is clearly a topic I am trying to avoid so I am going to try to deflect by talking about the weather."

If we're in the dark about people's emotional states, it's up to us to pay attention to others to try to ascertain how they feel

about topics, stories, and the conversation itself. We need to look beyond the mere words people speak and at the circumstances to gauge their feelings.

Joe tells a story about a man with his broken leg in a cast being helplessly humped by a large dog. What are the ways you can judge whether someone thinks this story is genuinely hilarious versus crass and immature? Did their laugh die quickly? Did they ask additional questions about the man? Did they give a polite smile and immediately change the subject?

We need to be more emotionally intelligent because emotions inform a great part of social interaction. As mentioned, we also need to be much more aware of the messages we're sending to others. For every action there can be a wide range of interpretations and reactions.

When you actively seek to understand the emotional state of people you're interacting with, which can be as simple as whether or not they are enjoying a topic of conversation, you're given a template for where to go and how.

Focusing on emotional intelligence and the emotional state of others is an approach that puts others first. It is the opposite of thinking in a self-centered manner, which is clearly beneficial because there are at least two parties to a conversation.

It boils down to this: if someone conveys that they are angry and we completely miss it, an awkward and uncomfortable situation arises. When this happens frequently enough, people will tend to avoid you. If you can accurately catch the emotions people are conveying, even though they may not be saying it explicitly, they will feel that you understand them better and be more drawn to you.

## **Play**

With so much focus on how to extract what you want from other people, what's been lost is the seemingly simple revelation that conversation should actually be fun and enjoyable.

There aren't that many reasons we engage in social conversations with others. A mixture of fun, pleasure, and entertainment are at the top of that list.

That's the reason that improv players labor during long rehearsals. They enjoy the process and being able to turn nothing into something. They are playing with each other onstage, and the better they are at playing, the more they enjoy it.

The same dynamic exists in normal conversation. If you can turn your boring, job-focused conversation into something enjoyable for both parties, then they will enjoy being around you more and subsequently open up to you more. If you make it your goal to first and foremost create a playful and fun atmosphere within your conversations, avoiding interview mode and small talk, you will be able to achieve your other goals, like a job or promotion, far more easily.

It's just human nature. Let go of your standard interview questions, comments about the weather, and brain filter. What is the playful manner in which you speak to your closest friends? How do children interact on the playground battlefield? We could stand to play a bit more since play takes people's guards down and sets the stage for actual connection.

## **Make it Easy**

For others, that is. Improv players are focused on making the performance shine, and they know they do that by giving others easy setups and premises to work with. They're not going to give others a scenario they know nothing about with a complete lack of details.

In addition to giving each other as many softballs as possible, they'll support each other and be on board however dire it gets. Someone will swoop in to rescue you, and you can depend on their help. It builds a sense of security and space for vulnerability to try new things and otherwise open up. Everyone is each other's best supporting actor or actress.

Now, that's a powerful feeling to have about someone you are speaking with.

There are many ways we can similarly make it easier for the person we converse with to speak their mind or express themselves. Display openness. Solicit opinions and ask questions. Put others in the spotlight and allow them to shine. Don't put others in a conversational place to twist in the wind.

Improv comedy is one of the best things you can learn for your ability to think on your feet, excel at witty banter, and know what to say. That being said, it's also one of the scariest. It thrives on unpredictability, the precise thing that people hate. Many stray from social interaction and conversation because it can be so unpredictable. *What if it's awkward, they hate you, think you're weird, or don't laugh at any of your jokes?*

This compels some people to have a script in their head every time they talk to people in an attempt to make it less unpredictable and more comfortable. However, that of course that takes you away from the present and the person in front of

you. Once you become more familiar and comfortable with the principles of improv, you will see the heights you can reach as a result of creating unplanned *flow*.



## Chapter 2. Always say “Yes, AND...”

*Rule of Improv Comedy: In response to someone else’s suggestion, thought, or topic, always say “Yes, AND...” which means that you drop your train of thought, adopt theirs, and add something to keep the conversation flowing.*

This is likely the one improv comedy method you may have heard of, and there’s good reason, because it’s so effective. It’s one of the first rules taught to beginners, and was taught to me on the first day of my workshop.

Here’s how this works in an improv comedy performance:

“Wait, look to your left! What is that? Is that... is that a Godzilla monster?!”

“Oh my gosh, you’re right! And it seems to have titanium armor and a laser mounted to its head!”

The first person asserted something, and the second person followed their lead, agreed, and even added an element for good measure. This rule is about how to keep an open mind and seize the power of possibility in your conversations.

There are a few specific elements about this rule.

The first element is that you are (some might say blindly) dropping whatever thought you had or story you wanted to tell. This is the most difficult part for most people. We enjoy sharing our thoughts with others, and sometimes we just want to talk about ourselves. That compulsion usually lacks balance, and people that aren't consciously aware of this rule typically lack the self-awareness to realize that others aren't enjoying hearing about every detail of their lives.

This first part takes discipline and practice, because even if we're not conversationally self-centered, sometimes we just want to finish or articulate our thoughts. We can, but you should realize that it might be detrimental to the flow of the conversation, which is the overarching goal.

The second element is to agree with the other person's assertion. You take it as true and accept it. You don't deny or argue with it – it's now a fact that you are operating from. You don't have to outright agree with it. Your goal is to let the other person know that you have accepted it as the new topic. Remember, there are no arguments or debates in improv comedy, only collaboration and teamwork. Therefore, you are collaborating with your teammate on this new topic.

The third element is the part that truly signals to people that you are on fully on board with them. You agree with them, and then add another comment to build upon what they said. It shows that you've found something interesting and noteworthy about the topic as well, which further encourages them to speak about it.



There are many overall effects to the rule. The first is that you are the opposite of a filter. Nothing is taboo, inappropriate, or too unimportant for you to speak about. You are happy to speak about anything, and you can add something to any topic. Where others might balk and shy away, you'll be the first to say "Yes!" and engage further. People will feel like they can open up to you and be vulnerable with you, which is no small feat.

Second, it keeps an immaculate conversational flow because you are seamlessly entering a new and foreign topic, despite what was discussed just prior. This rule keeps things smooth, where people that fight to jump back to the prior topic of discussion can seem selfish, stilted, or just plain awkward.

And of course, adopting the mindset of this rule means that you are collaborating with the person that you're speaking to. No matter what they bring to the table, you'll work with them to make a good discussion from it.

At its root, this is a chapter about recognizing where people may want to go in a conversation and meeting them there, instead of steering it back towards a topic that you want.

"Health insurance is so expensive these days." You can handle this assertion in many ways.

You can simply refuse it, "No, I get it super cheap. I don't know what you are talking about." This obliterates conversational flow and can sound borderline confrontational. At the very least, it's argumentative because you've completely contradicted someone else's experience, putting them on the defensive.

You can agree with it, “Yeah, it sucks.” Well, where does the conversation go from here? An acknowledgment by itself is conversational dead space because you’ve bounced the ball back to the other person with nothing behind it.

Finally, you can use *yes, AND*, “Yeah, it sucks. Seems like it’s been going up forever, right?” Note that you don’t need an explicit fact about health insurance, you just need an additional comment on the general topic. This means you don’t actually need to know much about the topics presented, you just need to be able to give a general statement which is far easier. This version of the response is by far the most superior, because it actually spurs on the conversation and doesn’t stop it dead in its tracks like the other responses.

Another example: “I love pepperoni pizza so much.”

Here is the disagreeing reply: “Pepperoni tastes like the cardboard box that the pizza is served in.” That’s not going to do much for rapport.

Here is the agreeing only reply: “Yeah, totally. It’s the best.” Again, a simple acknowledgment is just a nod of the head. It doesn’t add anything and doesn’t give people anything to comment further on. In fact, it’s one of the leading causes for awkward silences.

Here is the *yes, AND* reply: “Yeah, it’s pretty great. I love mushrooms too, but never sardines.” See how the sentiment is agreed with and expanded upon? The expansion wasn’t directly about pepperonis, but added to the conversation nonetheless. It shows your conversation partner that you’re on the same page as them by taking them deeper into the topic, no matter how shallow, that they brought up. You display a willingness to engage on anything. Instead of walling off a

conversation, highlight your emotional engagement in the other person by adding to it.

It's just as important to realize how *not* to respond here. If you respond in the first two ways as shown in the examples, you'll repel people far more than you realize.

You want to send a signal to others that their words are important to you. Remember that the overall goal is to create a pleasurable experience, and nothing can be more pleasurable than feeling valued and validated. This makes them seek out your company even more.

One more example for good measure: "These shoes are pretty old, I want new ones."

The argumentative answer: "You don't need them."

The agreeing only answer: "Yeah, I guess."

The *yes, AND* answer: "Yeah, I guess. Seems like you have had them for a decade."

Now let's try something slightly different. "I just read that the sky is blue because the sky is the eyeball of a giant bird."

This is obviously something that is difficult to agree with. You can't really respond positively here without lying through your teeth. In instances where you find it difficult to agree with the sentiment of people's words, substitute "Yes, AND..." with "Yes, really?"

You may not necessarily agree, but the beauty of the phrasing is that you are not opposing them explicitly, which keeps their guards down and keeps confrontation from rising. It essentially creates an agreeable context for discussion and mutual understanding. The *really?* statement also isn't an explicit refusal. How might you answer the assertion from earlier about the sky and the giant eyeball?

“Oh, interesting. That sounds like something I may have heard before. Where did you hear about that?”

You have not accepted their assertion, but you haven't denied it in a way that will raise their defenses. All you've done is raise innocent curiosity and interest in the topic, which is sometimes as good as it gets for wild assertions. Where *yes*, *AND* allows you to respond in instances where you can agree and discuss freely, *yes, really?* is for situations where you want to disagree mightily. It's more effective because it softens the negative impact, and also attempts to find common ground and understanding.

Let's contrast both of those versions of this improv comedy rule with *yes, BUT* – a more negative spin. You immediately come off as combative. You come off as arguing, or trying to correct them. This turns the conversation into a power struggle. Instead of an ally, you come off as an adversary obviously trying to take control of the agenda.

Recall that improv is about accomplishing a shared goal. This requires flow, working together, and accepting what other people bring to the table regardless of what it is. That's the essence of “Yes, AND...” and the opposite of “Yes, BUT...”

There are no right or wrong answers, only answers that lead to flow and those that do not. A great conversation has a million different directions, and you must be open to all of them.

Does this sound like a lot of work with the burden falling solely on you most of the time? The unfortunate truth is people won't help you out here, so it's up to you to create the kind of connections and interactions you want.



## Chapter 3. Read and React to Everything

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Whatever someone is communicating, they did for a reason, so react to further that reason.*

One of the biggest challenges by neophyte conversationalists and improv players is reading people accurately. It's definitely a skill that requires practice.

I distinctly remember an instance of speaking to a fellow attorney at a networking event years ago. I had said multiple times that I needed to find the bathroom, and that I needed to go soon, but he just didn't take the hint. Every time I would say it, he would launch into another story about himself. I eventually realized he couldn't read people; it was like trying to read Chinese for him, and he was not Chinese. Finally, I interrupted him mid-story and waltzed away gracefully.

It didn't take a mastermind to read me in that situation, but rarely is reading people's emotions and state of mind so clear and obvious. Players in improv comedy have to do the impossible on a daily basis – ascertain what someone is trying to communicate based on *very* few cues.

At first, you might not catch the cues. Once you learn what they are, you'll start to spot them more and more. As you get better, you'll be able to see them coming before they even emerge, because there are certain patterns that always arise. That's how it is with improv comedy and that's how it is with conversation.

For instance, an eye roll can mean many things in isolation, but when you pair an eye roll with bored body language and a scoff, it probably means that someone is bored with you.

Getting better at reading people is the first step to this chapter's rule of reacting to everything as it allows you to know exactly what you are reacting to. You wouldn't react to a story about a friend's death with laughter, so it's important that your read and your reaction are congruent with each other. Sometimes we instinctually just know, like when we laugh when a friend tells a bad joke, or when someone shows you a video and you know that you're supposed to laugh when they do.

How can you read people better? It starts with what they talk about, and how much they talk about it. In fact, for the purposes of this book, it's the most important part. Just listen to them.

People drop hints in conversation all the time. There's a reason they bring up what they bring up, and what they seem to want to dwell on.

There's a reason people speak in deeper, specific detail about some things, and will continually steer the conversation back even after they go on a tangent. It's important to them and they want to share it with you.



For example, if someone keeps talking about their dog, or seems to mention them in an offhand manner multiple times, this is a breadcrumb for you to follow, Inspector Holmes. Rarely will people say “I want to talk about my dog, listen to me now,” as opposed to shoehorning it in semi-organically into an existing conversation.

You’re looking for these breadcrumbs that others want you to pick up on so they can talk about what they want.

Let me backtrack and reiterate. People will literally tell you what they’re interested in by what they talk about. They’ll either bring it up spontaneously and on their own, or speak about a subject with a measure of excitement and joy. Those are your indicators for how to read people, but they require you to really pay attention to the other person and above all else, stop speaking so you can hear them.

If they don’t have energy or excitement about a topic, or they appear to switch topics spontaneously, then it’s clear that they aren’t interested in it. People won’t outright say that they want to talk about certain topics, so it’s up to you to pick up on their hints and react accordingly.

Of course, there is also the non-verbal portion of reading people. For the purposes of this book, we’ll keep it simple. You have to know only one thing: the baseline of body language of the other person. In other words, what are someone’s facial expressions and body language when they feel normal and not expressing an emotion?

For example, some people might naturally be bubbly and speak with their hands, and others might be as still as a wooden doll even when they’re ecstatic. This baseline can let you know when someone deviates from it, and then you can interpret their body language accordingly. If the

aforementioned person who is incredibly still even when happy shows a hint of motion and emotion, you can safely assume that they are overjoyed, or upset, by something.

Again, these are the breadcrumbs that people want you to find, and this is especially true the better people get with conversation. Conversation at the highest levels becomes all shades of gray and subtlety because both parties pick up on the signals being exchanged. Much of what is said during an exchange of witty banter is subtext and between the lines, so to speak, because both parties operate on multiple levels.

Here are some common breadcrumbs:

The excitement, or lack thereof, in someone's voice when you bring up a topic.

If someone keeps trying to bring up a topic, this means they want to talk about it.

If someone keeps looking away, this means that they are bored.

If someone's feet are pointed away from you, this means they want to stop talking to you.

If you interrupted someone right as they were about to speak, ask them about it after you finish speaking to see what direction they were interested in going.

See if you can tell if their smiles and laughs are fake or real, depending on how big they are and how quickly they fade or stop.

If someone ignores what you say and goes back to what they were talking about before you spoke, they feel strongly about their point and want to expand on it.

If someone leans their head on their hand, this means they might be bored with the current flow of the conversation.

Look for how strongly someone nods in agreement with you, and on the flip side, how little excitement or emotion there is in their reaction.

The final aspect of getting better at instantly reading people is to think in terms of emotions. Whatever someone says or demonstrates to you through their body, they are doing it to create an emotional response.

A story about their dog feeding a kitten? They want a happy smile.

A story about being cut off in traffic? They want shared agony.

A statement about their foot being run over by a bike? They want a laugh.

These are all emotions that people want to evoke in you, so give it to them! That's the final aspect in a nutshell: proactively think about the underlying emotion people want to evoke you, and then give it to them. It sounds like it would be incredibly difficult to do in the spur of the moment, but it's easier than you think since there are only so few emotions that want back from you.

*Joy. Anger. Humor. Annoyance. Amazement. Curiosity.*

If you think about most of what people have told you in the past week, and what you have told others, that short list covers almost all the bases for the emotional responses that were sought. They cover the bulk of the reasons that we share stories about our lives.

A story about their dog feeding a kitten – what is the reason that someone is telling you about this? Is it so you can feel annoyance? Amazement? Joy? It's probably humor and joy. Show them that you understand and give them the reaction that they expected.

In fact, exaggerate your reactions. Not by too much, just enough so that it's unmistakable the emotion that you're feeling.

There is a thin line between being emotionally touched by somebody's shared information, and mocking that person by caricaturing their emotions. If you go overboard, you may seem like you're mocking and patronizing them. They will feel judged and insulted.

Instead, jump on board with them and their emotion. If they come to you with a story about how they were slighted, first show the appropriate matching emotion in a way that will make them feel acknowledged and validated. That's what matters first in reacting. What you do next can be any mixture of asking questions or validating more, but the initial reaction makes the biggest impact.

People have different levels of emotional intensity, and the middle of the bell curve as far as emotional expression is concerned can be quite wide. This simply means that people

perceive and experience emotions differently, so what you think is an indulgent and overboard reaction may not register at all for someone else. This is the case for most people. They think they are conveying a message, but in reality have only managed a frown or smile.

It therefore pays to be slightly dramatic and overboard with your emotional reaction, just to ensure that you aren't being too subtle for your own good. Some of us have poker faces far more than we realize, so exaggeration is sometimes necessary to get our message across. Plus, a big reaction makes people feel good, as if they have bestowed us with valuable information.

A conversation is a two-way street.

You can't just say what you want, wait while the other person is talking, and then say what you want again as if they merely interrupted you. It's not just a simple matter of waiting for your turn to speak.

Conversation is about mutual sharing that leads to mutual listening and learning, otherwise it's just two monologues being directed towards each other. Hopefully, if you can acknowledge the importance of what they're saying to them, then they will do the same to you because they'll feel heard, validated, respected, and important.

This is going to feel unnatural and uncomfortable for some, but if you want your conversations to go deeper and last longer, you need to play this game. Reactions aren't natural to all of us, and we may not even care about most of the things that people say. The goal is to improve our conversations, and you can't improve if you don't investigate new things that are out of your comfort zone.

One final thing: React to *everything*. This includes stories, gestures, looking at their phone, taking their jacket off, stretching their arms, questions about the same topic, a puzzled facial expression, tilting their head, an eye roll, an uncomfortable smile, and so on.

There may not be a flashing emotion to demonstrate, but they still did these things for a reason, and if you react to everything, you will show yourself to be one hundred percent present with the other person.

Here's a good exercise to practice your reactions:

Pretend that you are mute while watching a television show, and react non-verbally to express the emotions that you interpret from the characters. Exaggerate these non-verbal reactions. Be sure to pause occasionally.

Facial expressions, body language, gestures, and eye contact. Make sure that your true message is getting across. This is practice for you to react to others, and see what the range of reactions can be to demonstrate that you've heard them. You may also discover that you have to exaggerate your reactions a bit to be understood, and that something that seemed so obvious to you actually was not.



## Chapter 4. Be More Specific

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Don't force others to answer broad questions because it puts a conversational burden on them and disrupts flow.*

Here's a piece of conversational advice that you've probably heard is devastating in improv comedy: just ask broad and open-ended questions, and people won't be able to stop talking.

Now let's imagine what happens if we ask open-ended questions during an improv performance.

“So, what is your favorite hobby?”

“Um... definitely hockey!”

It's not ideal because there is zero context for the person to use, and they are left to analyze and interpret the question. What kind of answer does the questioner ask, and what exactly do they mean by hobby? What is a hobby, even? What does favorite mean? Those are the other questions that someone has to first answer internally when you ask them a broad, open-ended question. It destroys the flow.



The exact same thing happens when you use those questions during normal conversations, but in slow-motion because the performer can literally say anything that pops into his or her mind, while the conversationalist will probably try to be accurate.

“So, what is your favorite hobby?”

“Um... You know, I don't know. I'll have to think about that. What about you?”

Or, as you can see, people will never arrive at the answer to the question, and they deflect back to the other person. The question was basically a waste of time.

That was a long-winded way of saying that while some conventional advice may sound good in theory, it doesn't work out in application, much like how communism sounds great in theory, but falls apart in practice because human nature always demands more.

We ask questions all the time because they come easily to us and we navigate our world through what we're curious about and take interest in. However, if you're trying to connect deeply with anyone, open-ended questions lead to awkward silence or minefields.

Flowing conversations involve a frictionless back and forth. This doesn't happen when you continually ask questions that stop people in their tracks, make them dig deep, and take them out of the present.

Open-ended questions make people work, and you want to make conversation as easy as possible for both parties.

“What do you like to do for fun?” has a tremendous impact on the free flow of the conversation. Unless you recently had an answer prepared for a job interview, there’s a very small chance you will be able to answer this in an organized sentence.

Most people, if they answer at all, will say something like, “Um... I guess I like to go running sometimes, and I watch a lot of movies.”

The question recipient has to take a mental break, decipher and interpret, then put forth a milquetoast answer because it’s a general question that begets a general answer. Worst of all, when you ask open-ended questions, you put the burden of keeping the conversation going on your partner.

In many cases, they feel that they’re doing all the work. Eventually, it becomes more of a chore rather something enjoyable. When people feel they are being interrogated, they start resorting to simple one-sentence answers. The sentences keep getting shorter and shorter until the conversation freezes.

Okay, so if broad, open-ended questions are more often minefields than not, what’s a better way to engage with others, both with questions and responses? With exponentially more specificity.

Specificity cuts through the majority of the interpretive work on the part of the person who is supposed to answer.

“What do you like to do for fun?” is much better phrased as, “Do you like to play music for fun? What about hiking or writing?”

Here, you just asked three specific questions as opposed to one broad question. This is going to be much easier for someone to answer, even if it's just with a simple yes or no. At least you've gotten something from them. Once you have a yes or no on a topic, then it's much easier to follow up on that specific topic and take the conversation in a certain direction.

All you do is make a specific assumption, which will give you a specific answer. Here's another example: "What's your favorite band?" is much, much better phrased as, "Do you like the Beatles, or is your style more Mozart, or is it more Bruce Springsteen?"

Again, you were able to turn one general question into three specific questions in a way that also makes it clear what you meant by your question, and the type of answer you are seeking. It's a way of interacting that reduces the burden on the other person. It may be a little more difficult to construct questions like this initially, but it can quickly become habit.

"What's your favorite band?"

"Good question... I'm not sure. I like rock."

"Do you like the Beatles, or is your style more Mozart, or is it more Bruce Springsteen?"

"Actually, none of them really, but I do like classic rock a lot."

Even if the recipient of your question says no to everything you ask, you will probably get an answer with more flavor than otherwise. Instead of one general piece of information, again, you receive four pieces of specific information: they don't like the Beatles, they don't like Mozart, they don't like

Bruce Springsteen, and they like classic rock. You can then dig deeper into any of those directions.

Let's see this one more time: "What did you do over the weekend?"

"Not much. Oh, I went shopping."

One piece of information.

"Do anything over the weekend, like shopping, hiking, or did you just relax in front of the television?"

"I did go shopping for groceries since I make my lunch every week, but otherwise I just relaxed with Netflix."

Four pieces of information.

To put it another way, being more specific in your line of questioning allows for you to obtain information for the conversation, but in as easy a way as possible.

Sometimes, you don't even have to ask a question – you can use a leading statement. A leading statement is one that begs a response and acts like a question, for example, "So, I guess that's the exit."

It is a statement, but it is actually a question that asks someone to confirm where the exit to a room is. This is a welcome break from continually asking questions, but it also introduces a very different dynamic to your conversation because statements convey information, where questions request information.

The way to create a leading statement is to make an assumption about the other person and say it out loud. That's it.

“So, I guess that's where the exit is.”

“You must be really great at tennis.”

“Sounds like it wasn't a very fun party.”

“You must have hated that.”

“I bet you're a big foodie.”

When you use leading statements, your conversation partner has an easier job. They can either confirm or deny it, and explain their answer.

“I bet you're a big foodie.”

“Actually, I totally am. It's my hobby and I have a food blog. My favorite food is French...”

“I bet you're a big foodie.”

“Actually, I'm totally not. Food is just fuel for me. Why did you say that?”

Leading statements serve the same purpose by allowing your conversation partner to answer, but they do it in ways that are easier, subtler, and more conversational than questions. They often have the same effect as a question, but are smoother and less like an interview. Leading statements make interaction and conversation easy for people to engage in because they don't require massive amounts of thinking, and create a great conversational flow.

One of the most common objections to this chapter's rule is that it's too much. It violates people's sense of privacy.

All of this talk about being specific versus being broad hides the fact that many of us don't feel comfortable getting specific because we feel it might be too invasive. We feel that we are invading someone's privacy and prying into someone's personal life too deeply.

This can happen on occasion, but there is such an overreaching fear of this happening that it keeps the majority of us on "safe," vanilla topics for far longer than we should be. We use broad and open-ended questions when we meet strangers at networking events, but we use specific questions and leading statements with friends because we're comfortable with them and don't feel judgment is just around the corner.

Like many things, the temptation to stay broad and open-ended is an external projection of an internal insecurity regarding conversation. Very rarely will someone tell you that you've gone too far, and they will almost always welcome the chance to avoid small talk and speak about more specific details of their lives.

Remember, the overall goal of being specific is to make conversation easy for both people. If you can accomplish this, they'll be far more open with you regardless.



## Chapter 5. Details, Details, Details

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Provide specific details for people to relate to, react to, and run with.*

A couple of years ago, I was running a mock conversation for a client before a big networking event. The idea was to get him ready for the types of conversations he would encounter so it would be fairly predictable for him, and he'd be able to prepare talking points on topics that were likely to come up. It was all designed to reduce his anxiety surrounding the event.

Here's how the first mock conversation went:

Me: So, where are you from?

Client: Illinois.

Me: Okay... what city?"

Client: Chicago.

Me: ... Okay, were you born there, too?

Client: No, I wasn't.

Me: Where were you born?

Client: Right outside of Chicago.



There are many problems with these types of answers, but the biggest issue is that there was just a glaring lack of details. Everything was answered with the bare minimum with one word or less, and it was deemed to be a sufficient answer because it answered the literal question.

Here's the mock conversation with better answers substituted in each phase:

Me: So, where are you from?

Client: Well, I was born right outside of Chicago, but most people don't know anything about Illinois so I just say Chicago.

Me: Where outside of Chicago?

Client: It's a little town called Exodus, whose claim to fame is that Michael Jordan once crashed his car into our general store.

Me: Were you born there, too?

Client: Yes, I was born there. There's only a population of about a thousand, and one hospital, so you could say it was a big deal.

Now imagine how that works in an improv comedy performance. If you answer with a lack of details, or just with one word, you are going to be stranding someone on a desert island. They won't have anything to react to or play off of, and they have to carry the burden of creating something for them to react to themselves. You might think that continually giving someone a blank page is helpful, but it just makes them carry the burden.

The collective goal is to make something work well, which means you have to put work into it and try to make it easier for

the rest of your teammates. It's the same with a conversation, and you are making it extremely hard to engage with you if you don't give people details in your answers, stories, or questions. Hopefully it's a theme that has been obvious throughout the book thus far: making a conversation easier for the other person will make it easier for you.

To further highlight the importance of giving details, let's compare a detail-laden story with a bare story.

Version one: Once upon a time, a man was held captive by a shiny golden lobster named Sebastian. Sebastian only had one arm as a result of a long-forgotten tussle with a fishing net. The man had been there for three years until he attempted to escape to his family and dogs, but he was caught in a matter of minutes because Sebastian also owned a speedboat. He ended up dying under the sea.

Version two: A lobster named Sebastian caught a man and held him captive for life.

Which version do you prefer?

The second version is as dry as a science lecture, while the first version is a full and complete picture of what happened. It's inherently more interesting for two reasons. First, it provides a three-dimensional description of the context and characters involved. That automatically makes people more interested and invested because they are already painting a mental picture in their minds and visualizing everything.

Second, it gives people more to connect to, think about, and attach themselves to. For instance, the second version gives about three elements for someone to think about or connect to. The first version gives no fewer than ten. Within those

elements, there is a substantially higher likelihood that people will find something funny, interesting, poignant, curious, and worthy of comment. The last part might be the most important because it gives more ammunition for everyone involved in the conversation.

In other words, there are only so many questions one can ask about the second version of the story, “A lobster named Sebastian caught a man and held him captive for life.” Suppose the number of questions is represented by the letter X. There will be 10X questions and ways that people can engage with the second story, and this is only good for your conversation’s flow.

It’s always the fine details that bring a story to life, like someone’s scent, or the way a book feels in your hand.

Storytelling is most effective when you are as specific as possible and provide as many details as you can remember or create.

Detail and specificity put people into a specific place and time. It allows them to imagine exactly what’s happening and start caring about it. Think about why it’s so easy to get sucked into a movie. We experience enormous sensory stimulation and almost can’t escape all of the visual and auditory detail, which is designed to make us invested. Detailed stories and conversations are inviting others to share a mental movie with you.

The story alone should never be depended on to deliver the impact.

Beyond giving flavor to your conversation and storytelling, and giving the other person something to ask about, details are

important because they are what make people emotionally engaged. Details remind people of their own lives and memories, and make them feel more drawn to whatever is presenting them.

They create pangs of nostalgia and make people reminisce.

For instance, let's suppose that you owned a very specific type of car when you were younger. It was an essential part of your youth and you committed many borderline crimes in that car.

A stranger at a networking event comes along and tells you about a car they had when they were younger and how much they loved it. Great story. But if they divulged additional details, and you discovered that you both owned the same exact car model as teenagers, now you really have something to talk about and connect on.

That's a simple way that details are always preferred. You allow others to step inside your world and find exactly what they share in common with it, and also trigger the emotions that you have felt.

Details can compel others to laugh, feel mad, feel sad, or feel surprise. They can control moods and emotions.

If you include details about specific songs that played during your high school dances, it's likely that someone will have memories attached to those songs and become more emotionally interested in your story.

If you include details about the tragic and chilling nature of your annual family ski trip, it's going to evoke a very different

reaction than just saying that you went skiing with your brother.

If you include details about the types of foods you love the most, someone is going to find commonality within one of those elements.

There is no such thing as TMI – too much information. Share details about all the figurative nooks and crannies, because that's what makes you interesting on an emotional level.

A final point of importance for details comes through interpretation. Most of what I've discussed about details has to do with how other people interpret and perceive you, but details can be used to interpret and read others more effectively. Namely, details allow us to understand what people feel is important and want to talk about or fixate on.

When you listen to a story, you can tell that a particular part of the story is more important than others when there's a lot more details regarding that part. People will never flat out tell us what they want to talk about, or that they would love to be asked about a certain element of their story or life. This is one of the ways they do it implicitly – by hoping that you catch on that they are talking in excruciating detail about their summer in Prague, and ask more questions about it.

If people want to talk about something, they hint about it with more details that they want others to pick up on. This might be done subconsciously, but it's up to you to pay attention to what is coming your way. Every conversation or story typically has some sort of goal. You can more easily find that goal just by paying attention to the details.

Here's a simple exercise to demonstrate the power of details and what they say about what people are thinking.

Ask someone to tell you about one of their most exciting and fun weekends that they can remember. Hopefully they have a lot to say about it. Covertly in your mind, count the number of details that they give to certain parts of the story.

Try asking them to elaborate on the parts of the story where there was more detail. Are they more excited about talking about those parts? Now try asking them to elaborate on parts of the story where there was little detail. Did they care at all? You can easily use details to find out what matters to people and what excites them. Let this guide your conversations.



## Chapter 6. No “No”

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Never lead with “No”. It disregards the direction that someone wants to go and makes it more difficult to work toward a common, shared goal.*

Everything you say during an improv performance has an effect because someone else is directly relying on it to create a semblance of flow.

Flow during a performance is like passing a baton during a relay race. There may be some stumbles along the way, and the baton might get fumbled, but it is always moving forward by the teamwork of the participants.

Leading with a “No” in the relay race of improv is like stopping completely and running the opposite direction. It destroys any sense of flow because people don’t usually predict that they are going to be met with a “No” upfront. In most cases, when you stop people outright with a “No,” it is going to make them defensive because you have probably just shot down something they wanted to convey.



Here's another simple analogy. In many countries, car traffic is extremely busy and crowded. You might ask how people in dense European or Asian cities can even navigate when they are within inches of other vehicles. The answer is simple. There is predictability in the flow. They believe that the other vehicles are following a flow, and the flow is going to be predictable and consistent. Therefore, they can come within inches without worrying because they know the other vehicles will be going in certain directions and only making certain turns.

If you disrupt the flow, then the entire sense of predictability gets destroyed and people won't understand where to go from there.

People had a certain expectation of where their improv performance or conversation was going, and a "No" completely derails it.

"And if you like pasta, then there's a great place near the water. You like pasta, right?"

"No."

"Oh."

"It's really interesting how aquariums are built. I love them."

"I don't."

"Um..."

See how the flow is disrupted if you reply with an outright refusal? There are many ways of replying without an outright refusal even if you truly disagree with the sentiment – because the signal you send with a "No" is mighty different from other signals.

To become a great conversationalist, you must be mindful of the signals you send out to others. They all come together to build a composite feeling of how much people will enjoy speaking to you. Believe it or not, each small detail makes a difference between failure and success. Each signal is a breadcrumb on the trail that leads to a great conversation.

If you say “No” in the beginning, you immediately set the wrong tone for your interaction. You immediately derail the train before it has the opportunity to build up any conversational steam. If you begin a sentence with the word “No”, you immediately set a negative tone for your interplay with your audience.

Another downside to starting off with “No” is that it blocks the addition of new information. You basically state that no additional information is needed or welcome. You’ve already made your own decision, and are not interested in listening to their reasons or details. This not only makes you appear closed-minded, stubborn, and abrasive, but it harms you because you don’t get the full picture of whatever you’re discussing.

For example, your friend asks you whether you’ve seen the basketball game that was going viral online. You simply reply “No,” and don’t show any interest otherwise.

How does that appear to your friend and how does it affect them? If they came to you excited and engaged, then you’ve just sapped their energy with that lackluster response. You appear disinterested, like you don’t care about what they are saying, and like they aren’t saying anything important. You’ve stolen their thunder and brought down their entire mood.

Contrast that with answering positively, and letting your friend direct a conversation about the basketball game. This will only take one or two minutes. Let them explain what they thought was entertaining, and let them keep their high spirits and positive mood. You can always direct the conversation into a direction you prefer afterwards. Don't be a selfish conversationalist.

You may not actually care, but it's not something that you should be open about.

Everyone encounters things they don't care about or have zero interest in everyday, yet not everyone comes off as rude and disinterested. That's what this chapter is focused on. It's *not* a chapter about only not using the word "No" as much, nor is it about just nodding your head and keeping quiet when people are presenting something that is contrary to your views or interest.

It's a chapter about not being dismissive of people, or shutting them down, because there are both short and long term effects of such habits.

The short term effects are awkwardness, confusion, tension, and disrupting a conversational flow. You are cutting people's topics short, which makes them confused if you truly meant to do that. When they realize that you did intend to cut them short, there is tension and awkwardness, and then the conversation is disrupted.

The long term effects are much worse, however. If you realize that whenever you talk to someone, they continually shut you down or appear to judgmentally refuse the direction you want to speak in, then they will stop opening up to you or bringing anything up to you. They won't feel comfortable being

vulnerable with you because you've proven that you only dismiss and reject them.

Nobody really *intends* to be offended when somebody says the word "No."

On a conscious level, we can intellectually understand why people would have objections. We can totally understand the concept of every coin having two sides. We're all mature adults, right?

The problem is we're also emotional creatures, and on an emotional level, the word "No" can be read as combative, hostile, stubborn and confrontational. Saying "No" can sometimes be seen as a rejection of someone's very identity or beliefs.

It's very easy to read all sorts of negative emotions into sentences that start with the word "No." On one hand, you can be perceived on a subconscious emotional level as hostile and combative. In the best case scenario, you might be seen as stubborn, hard-headed and closed-minded. Neither of these situations is good.

"No" makes people walk on eggshells around you.

They'll feel that certain topics are off limits, or they'll feel that they don't want to bring anything up because they'll be judged and rejected. This is the beginning of the end for your conversational rapport, and it becomes an unpleasant chore for others to engage with you.

It's only a matter of time until they conclude that the benefits of knowing you are outweighed by the hassles of having to

talk *around* you. Unfortunately, a lot of people do this subconsciously. It's all a misunderstanding, most of the time.

Take the role of the salesperson.

A well-known sales technique is to continue to ask people escalating questions that inevitably they answer "Yes" to, such as "Would you like to save more money?" They thrive on creating a flow of positivity, and the positivity leads to sales because people imagine what they are missing by not having what is being sold. When you begin a sentence with "No", you are essentially poisoning the well of your prospects as to what's possible, for better or worse.

Any kind of sales involves selling a dream, and saying "No" destroys the possibility of that dream subconsciously. Guess what? It's the exact same for your conversations.

No, we can't or won't talk about that. No, we have no interest in that. No, we'd rather not. So what's left? Not much. It's much easier to speak to somebody when they at least appear to be open and in *discovery* mode, versus closed-minded and in *prevent* mode.

Overall conversations are about working toward a common shared goal, though one or both parties may not always realize it. Is it easier to work toward a common shared goal through finding common area, or through immediate dismissal and disagreement? Which of the scenarios would result in someone feeling heard and validated, versus ignored and belittled?

Remember, this isn't a point about removing one particular word from your vocabulary. It's about understanding the

signals that you constantly send, miniscule and gargantuan,  
and what you can do to improve them.



## Chapter 7. Create Motion

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Scenes and interactions must always be moving somewhere and creating motion.*

Creating motion and having the interaction go somewhere is not what you might expect it to mean.

When you have motion in a conversation, it's not that you are injecting it with energy and high spirits. It's that you can't stay on the same topic forever, and the conversation needs to evolve in one way or another, or else interest will be lost.

Let's look at this in the improv comedy context. Let's suppose that the starting topic for an improv scene is a visit at the dentist, and it begins in the lobby. Does the scene stay in the lobby? Absolutely not. It moves in at least one of a few ways.

The scene might move locations into the office of the dentist itself.

The scene might introduce multiple different characters.



The scene might change its focus and move away from the dentist altogether.

The scene might change the initial purpose and the patient is visiting the dentist because he is an assassin. And so on.

Contrast any of those situations to a scene that stays exactly in the same lobby, with the same characters. It may not be the worst scene, but it won't be able to introduce any of the interesting settings or details that would arise from *creating motion*, and that's what it means when an improv scene must go somewhere. You can't talk about the same thing in the same setting forever. Introducing new threads is always going to be more beneficial to the scene.

To boil it down to one main sentiment, the people involved in either a conversation or an improv scene will have an easier time if they intentionally create motion and seek to introduce new elements.

In normal conversation, for example, you can't talk about the weather forever. You need to create motion away from it, or into it from a different angle. It seems obvious that motion, and that an interaction, must go somewhere would be necessary and beneficial, but many people will fall prey to one major trap with it. In the quest for motion and additional elements and angles, there is the danger of planning ahead with fixed ideas and destinations in mind.

This is dangerous for a few reasons.

First, imagine the concept of an improv comedy performance with three participants, and all three already have fixed ideas of where they want to scene to go. In essence, they will be influencing each other and trying to herd the other two into the

directions that they want. It won't be teamwork, it's just teammates trying to exert control over each other in front of an audience. It won't be pretty unless you like hearing three monologues simultaneously.

Second, you run the risk of spectacular failure when you are derailed from the path of your fixed destination. This is because you are so fixated on the destination that you haven't kept an open mind to other subjects or topics, and won't be able to adapt very well.

If you've been thinking the whole time about how to turn the conversation or performance to the subjects of cars, you will probably come up tongue tied when the subject instead turns to different types of hats. If you are open to the destination, you can roll with the punches, so to speak, because your mental bandwidth isn't otherwise consumed.

Third, having a fixed destination in mind for your conversation or improv performance makes you too goal-oriented, by definition this means you are willfully ignoring everything else that happens in front of you. You might even be dismissing them because they aren't what you are looking for.

Suppose that you want to arrive at the same topic of cars, and other topics keep getting in the way. Being overly goal-oriented would lead you to continually bring up cars, even though it would be a completely random shift in topic, and unwelcome since it was steered away from multiple times. It makes you appear tone deaf, and people will begin to wonder if you've even heard them speak. It also generally makes you a fairly un-engaging conversationalist.

Creating motion is preferred, but you can't necessarily plan ahead for it. That defeats the open-ended nature of improv

comedy that makes it so engaging and entertaining.

Instead, you can plan for your conversations to resemble stories and movies, and learn about specific types of motion you can introduce on the fly.

When you go to a movie, you're not looking for something that fits your daily life. You're looking for a story about something significant, or unusual or extraordinary, a deviation from your daily life. If you're going to watch a biographical movie, you wouldn't want to watch the mundane parts where they use the bathroom and brush their teeth.

Instead, you want to see the unique, interesting, and exaggerated parts. You want to see conflict, problem solving, then resolution. These are all accomplished by creating motion in normal conversation topics, and not just staying in one place.

A conversation that stays in one place will eventually become boring filler, since topics can easily be exhausted without motion. As I mentioned before, there are only so many comments or questions you can make about the weather. So, how do you create motion in a topic such as the weather?

Types of motion:

- Change to a topic related to the weather.
- Go deeper into the topic of weather, beyond shallow and surface level comments.
- Share a personal experience with weather.
- Ask what their favorite types of weather are.
- Talk about the emotions the weather invokes in you.
- Talk about your nuanced opinion on the weather.
- Ask outlandish hypothetical questions about the weather.

- Reference third parties (papers, articles, statements from friends) regarding the weather.

Note that these are similar ways of creating motion as the ways of manipulating the scene at the dentist's lobby from earlier in this chapter. They force the interaction to go somewhere, and don't allow it to remain on comments about the weather, or to stay in the dentist's lobby.

Another way to think about creating motion in conversation is that it's a measure of conversational agility. Before one topic is completely bled dry, you can jump to other ones to keep engagement high and prevent stagnation.

Stagnation is one of the sneakier causes of poor interactions because it's something that we all do eventually. It's the lazy person's way of conversing –relying on the other person to shoulder the burden of topics and details. This rule of creating motion battles stagnation as it forces you to move away from lazy routines.

Let's take another example where the topic is suddenly steak.

Types of motion:

- What made you bring up steak and why it was on your mind?
- What memories you have with steak.
- How your view of steak has changed over the years.
- A random fact or piece of trivia you know about steak.
- Your emotions regarding steak.
- Ask for their emotions regarding steak.

Joseph Campbell was an Ivy League academic who studied the major myths of all the world's major spiritual traditions, and according to Campbell, the great myths and stories share certain elements in common. Regardless of whom the stories are told to, they are always effective because they hit on certain classic themes that are contained in the Hero Cycle.

The hero of the story starts at point A, and a situation arises that necessitates that the hero goes to point B. On the way back from point B to point A, certain conflicts and resolutions occur, and the hero is forever transformed and enlightened.

According to Campbell, people respond to the Hero Cycle because we can relate to the stages. We have all struggled, conquered, and grown through fear, adversity, and obstacles. The Hero Cycle goes a long way in explaining how people from all over the world, from all sorts of cultures, class levels and education levels deal with the same phenomena in much the same way.

Great stories and great conversations are journeys. They never remain in the same place. There is a sense of direction, there is a sense of conflict that needs resolution, and there is a sense of tension that needs to be unwound. It's not a preset place that you end up in, and there's a sense of closure. There's a payoff, and that's what creating motion does.



## Chapter 8. It's Entertainment, Not Discussion

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Improv is about creating interesting situations for the sake of greater entertainment for the other players and the audience.*

Human beings have minds that are wired to pay attention to things that are noteworthy and entertaining. The human brain can only store so much information. This is why it is constantly editing its experiences.

When was the last time you remembered somebody you talked to at a dinner party who was extremely boring? Probably never.

The reality of most people's lives is that the bulk of our time is spent experiencing very mundane things. We wake up in the morning, brush our teeth, and take a shower. We don't even remember if we do these things because they are so routine for us.

However, that one time we almost drowned to death in the Pacific Ocean, or went sky diving over Tanzania – these experiences are burned into our brains since they are

noteworthy and entertaining. Events that involve thrills, chills, and spills will never leave our minds, even if we want them to.

The point is that entertaining or noteworthy situations are the best and most effective way to make an impression and captivate people. This is true both in improv comedy and conversation.

Which of the following scenarios do you think would create a better improv scene: one set in a clown college, or one set in an empty room? What about the following: a church versus a carnival?

Which of the following would you prefer to watch? It's a fairly easy choice. The reason that we would almost always choose the clown college or carnival is because we imagine they will be more entertaining. There's no point otherwise.

Improv comedy really serves two audiences: the audience in the seats and the players on the stage. Both audiences must be entertained and have fun, otherwise there is no point for either audience to be involved in an improv performance.

The amount of information, education, or even utility of the performance doesn't matter to either of the audiences. You might be a walking encyclopedia, but you will be entirely forgettable if you focus solely on sharing information. That turns into a lecture very quickly. The currency of the audiences, and why they continue to either watch or act, is entertainment and pleasure!

How many Oscar-winning movies were educational versus entertaining? Even if you end up learning nothing or gaining nothing from an improv performance, you can still walk away



happy if you've been entertained because you'll have been engaged emotionally.

Unsurprisingly, the exact same sentiment surrounds conversation. In any setting outside of a lecture hall, the sole purpose and currency is going to be entertainment and pleasure. You won't care to engage if you feel bored and displeased, and feelings of entertainment and pleasure will override the lack of anything else in a conversation.

Humans are social creatures with limited brain capacity, so we gravitate toward entertainment. Perhaps this has all been a long-winded way of saying that you need to focus on creating an entertaining and pleasurable interaction for the people involved above all else, even above things you might consider are more important, like propriety, appropriateness, politeness, and a sense of professionalism. Entertainment is the common thread that will allow anything you want from an interaction to flow naturally, from sales to networking to romance.

Teachers who give speeches or lectures are serious because they want to achieve something. This tends to strip the life out of things, and instead of something vibrant and enjoyable, it can easily become dry or one-sided. There's a reason entertainers are rich, but teachers aren't.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when focusing on entertainment to become a better conversationalist.

### **Don't Take It So Seriously**

Entertaining conversations may be about serious topics or silly topics, but the common thread is that the conversationalist doesn't take themselves or the topics too seriously.

The number one goal of the conversation is to create fun and pleasure, so that means the other ulterior motives that may exist, such as proving your intelligence, winning a pissing match, or trying to accomplish a goal, must be ignored. As we noted earlier, these are all going to be detrimental to the rapport you build because you are too fixated and focused on these to be able to speak openly and freely.

You are there simply to get people to enjoy being around you. This is actually positive because there are many ways to accomplish that goal, as opposed to a goal of making a sale. The more pressure you put on your conversation, the more serious and strained it becomes.

How do you take your conversations less seriously? It's a matter of interpretation and reaction. There are two ways to interpret and react to any given statement.

"I just went skiing and almost crashed into a tree."

Response #1: "I see. Did you hurt yourself?"

"I didn't, but almost."

This response is serious and plays directly to the facts. It's nice to be worried about someone, but it's a conversation direction that leads to a serious discussion. You're asking about the context and the consequences here, and you will likely ask more about the procedure of the near-crash – again, which is fine, but is a serious way of responding.

"I just went skiing and almost crashed into a tree."

Response #2: "I always knew you were an amazing skier."

"Hah, I know. I've always been so coordinated."

What's the difference between these two responses? This one actually sidesteps the discussion about the near-crash and makes a joke about the person's skiing ability. Some of you might interpret this as a callous and insensitive question, but that's the reason you're not more entertaining in conversation. People aren't telling you about their near-crash for your sympathy, they are telling you because it's notable and they want to engage on it. You are engaging on it here, but also giving a response that prompts people to open up, joke, and play on the topic.

You can see the response from the other person afterwards as well. They go in very different directions.

Here's another example:

"I'm going to grocery store, do you want anything?"

Response #1: "That's okay, I don't need anything."

"I'm going to grocery store, do you want anything?"

Response #2: "Haven't you had enough chocolate today?"

One is a discussion, the other is entertainment. Here's another example:

"What kind of shoes are these?"

Response #1: "I'm not sure, I will look them up."

"What kind of shoes are these?"

Response #2: "I think we're too poor to know this brand."

Getting the hang of it yet? You're playing and making a joke out of what has been said to you in the name of entertainment. You are avoiding a normal discussion about facts and details, and retorting as a petulant child would to their parent. However, you need to occasionally take the temperature of your conversation partner to make sure that you aren't cutting off their attempts to have an actual discussion about something more serious.

Finally:

"I need coffee right when I wake up."

Response #1: "Yes, I agree. Coffee is important."

"I need coffee right when I wake up."

Response #2: "Even before you use the toilet?"

### **Move Past Generic Topics**

The previous point on being less serious concerned the manner in which you discuss topics, but the other way to have more entertaining interactions is to talk about inherently more interesting and entertaining topics.

For many of us, this means venturing into uncomfortable territory because we feel "safe" on those generic topics. This means we don't want to offend others or make them feel uncomfortable. It's why we often stick to topics like the weather, the weekend, or current events. We are staying extremely *vanilla* in topics so we can walk on eggshells and filter ourselves.

When we do this on a daily basis, it's easy head down a slippery slope where you eventually realize you only talk about shallow topics with anyone you come across. You eventually tire yourself out trying to dance around people's sensitivities that your conversation dies an early death. Safe is boring.

This point revolves around one question: what do you speak to your friends about? Then talk to everyone you come across on those topics as well.

No one wants to stay mired on shallow small talk all the time, but that's what happens when we treat people like strangers, and when we feel like we have to respect people's boundaries. Here's the secret: people who seem to make friends everywhere do so because they speak to everyone like they are already a friend. This goes the same for topics of conversation.

Look at the topics you feel might be sensitive straight in the eye and don't be afraid to go there. At the very least, you'll be memorable for your boldness, and at best, you'll stand out from the rest of the people that spend their time and energy dancing around certain topics.

By and large, people are not that sensitive. People just imagine that they are, especially around certain topics. That's why we sometimes overuse the phrase "I hope you don't mind my asking..." Have you ever said that to someone who actually said "Well, I do in fact mind, so let's change the subject"?

Personal life and relationships? People love talking about this with others, if only to brag. Everyone can relate, so they are great ways to find common ground.

People's stances on controversial or sensitive topics? As long as you don't argue and debate them endlessly, people love the chance to expound on their beliefs.

Their unfiltered opinions on people and things? Everyone loves a good bitching or rant, even if they won't admit it.

The goal is not to inform somebody, nor lay out a package of information, nor convince someone to buy from you. Instead, make people entertained by your presence.

If you find yourself caught in a slow avalanche of boring questions and queries, don't be afraid to simply proclaim, "Hold on, why are we talking about work outside of work? I want to hear all about the crazy times you've been having with your new girlfriend!" This isn't going to hurt anyone's feelings, because even if they wanted to talk about work, they want to talk even more about their personal life and new girlfriend.

It's easy once you get into the state of mind to treat your conversations as entertainment and not discussion. Play Devil's advocate. Compare something to a Disney movie plot. Ask personal questions. Answer questions in movie or song quotes. Completely change topics. Think out loud about questions you have about life. Ask hypothetical questions based on what you see around you. Ask a rhetorical, provocative question and see if they bite.

See? There are many ways to accomplish this goal of entertainment versus discussion.

Many of us tend to filter ourselves so we don't offend or bother others. You hide your personality because you aren't

sure how you are going to be taken, how people will react to you, and how much people will like the true you.

But that's totally bunk.

Let your quirks and personality show. They will draw people to you who really enjoy you, and push away those who don't. Why would you want to be surrounded by those that don't understand your quirks? It's freeing, empowering, and a heck of a lot more entertaining to be yourself and bounce your personality off those who are like-minded.

Never be afraid to put your personality on center stage. That is the only thing differentiating you from the vast herd of people out there. Strive to loosen up and treat your conversations as an exercise in creating a fun environment. How fun and absurd can you make it?

Here's an exercise that you may or may not feel comfortable performing to completion:

Sit a friend down and tell them to prepare for fun. Ask them all the questions that you never dared to ask. Sex. Relationships. Sex. Politics. Religion. Family. Sex. Fears. Flaws. Ask at least ten specific questions.

What kind of conversation follows every time you ask one of those questions? People share their stances. They're open. They feel comfortable. They're often more willing to talk about it than you think, and sometimes even eager. It becomes impossible not to have an interesting discourse about those stances, how they reconcile with yours, and how they came to embrace those stances.

People are open to more topics than you think, and often have a lot to say on them, which encourages a great conversation.





## Chapter 9. Think On Your Feet

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Great improv is a result of the creativity in spontaneous situations, and set agendas and outlines put a very low ceiling on that.*

Improv comedy performances are, guess what, improvised!

The performers may occasionally work with a set theme that has been decided on beforehand, but there will always be large portions of an improv performance that involve taking direction from the crowd or audience. They can't predict what a crowd will give them to work with, so it's out of necessity that they can't have an agenda or outline.

That's part of the fun in attending an improv performance: you feel that you are a part of the outcome and have contributed to the show.

Obviously, these are situations where the performers have to think on their feet as quickly as possible, so they don't get tongue-tied and silent while everyone in the room is waiting.

You have to process what was said to you, try to project where you want the scene to go, and then predict what others might also say in response. You have to read people's body language, try to determine if there is any ulterior message, and actively provide detail that other people can work with. In a split second, you need to perform a full analysis of the entire scene and spit out words that will enhance the most important aspects of it. Oh, and you're in front of a crowd of people, and there is a team of people on stage waiting on your response.

That might be the very definition of thinking on your feet.

Improv comedy is collaborative in nature, but it's impossible to know what your teammates are thinking.

How does all of this make you a better conversationalist?

Recall that improv performances and conversations have the exact same goal – a flowing, entertaining interaction. If we look at some of the ways that improv performers are able to think fast and approach this unpredictability, we'll be able to improve our conversation skills immensely.

The first step, without a doubt, is to let go of any preconceived notion of how and where you want your conversation to go. Professional improv players are able to create a fluid, dynamic, and witty interplay with their audience members because they are flexible and open to any possibility and direction.

Yes, it can definitely be scary to go into a conversation with a completely blank slate, so to speak, especially if you are the type to plan and scheme. But planning and scheming has

probably not gotten you too far in social conversations , so it's time to open up and let go of the talking points or agendas you want to take into your conversations with you.

Don't worry. I won't let you enter them unprepared, you just won't be using set agendas. By the way, when I mention set agendas, I mean goals, talking points, or objectives that people want to achieve or gain from a conversation.

When you talk to other people, the focus of the conversation should be about the conversation. Each conversation is its own animal, with its own inherent flow and natural rhythm. It should not be about you or what you are trying to get out of the other person or people.

The moment other people are able to perceive your agenda, guess what happens? They will shut you out. You become somebody worthy of suspicion and skepticism. If you are trying to sell something, it makes it all that much harder once people feel that you have an ulterior motive. It's difficult to overcome the feeling that someone wants something from you.

First, it becomes exceedingly clear that you are only waiting for your turn to speak, and not actually listening to people. You aren't present and you aren't listening.

People might say something to you, and you might not even acknowledge their statement and just continue along with yours. Others will notice your patterns sooner than you think. What are they getting out of a conversation like that?

Second, agendas leave people unready to adapt. Unless you are going to drop a speech on an audience, things will never go exactly as you plan.

When you create an agenda, you memorize it and become reliant on it. When that happens, the more uncomfortable we are with the predictability of thinking on our feet. What happens when you deviate and can't find a good place to step back into your agenda? You're left utterly unprepared for the rest of the interaction because of your reliance.

This is why it is extremely important to constantly listen to other people and acknowledge them. You might even go with *their* agenda. That's okay, because your goal here is to build rapport, and that will do it.

Let them feel that the conversation is a two-way street. It actually becomes a two-way street when you stop, listen, and interrupt your own thoughts for theirs.

Up to this point in the chapter, we've discussed the negatives of over-preparing for conversations and coming in with outlines of what you want to discuss. Being able to rely solely on your ability to improvise is incredibly important, but just as frightening for some. So, how can we increase our capacity for quick thought?

There's no way other than through intentional practice.

The first method is to take your favorite quick-witted television show with your remote in hand, because you'll be pausing constantly. For example, *30 Rock*, *Gilmore Girls*, or even *Saturday Night Live*. These are all good shows to use because there is a lot of witty banter, and direct and indirect jokes. They have the type of dialogue we want to be able to create ourselves.

Now, pretend that you are one of the characters on the screen. It doesn't matter who you are, as long as they have a lot of interaction with other characters. Then, when other characters reply to your character on screen, pause the show and construct your own reply. This is going to train your ability to think through different circumstances and come up with replies.

It's not going to be easy at first. You'll probably be blank a lot of the time and not know what to say. However, if you can do this for at least fifteen minutes a day for a week, you'll eventually become quicker with your replies. You can also do this with podcasts and radio interviews. What you're doing is putting yourself in a position to think quickly. You can then hear what your character or avatar actually said, and you can get immediate feedback on what you could have said given the circumstances. Every piece of feedback is going to help hone your ability to come up with wit in record time.

The second method is to play free association with words and phrases. Free association is when you hear a word, then you come up with another word that the first word makes you think of. The second word can be anything, and the goal is to do this instantaneously.

For example, cat:dog, dog:puppy, puppy:paws, paws:fur, fur:allergies, allergies:medicine, medicine:nurses, nurses:doctors, doctors:plastic surgeon, plastic surgeon:fake lips, and so on. That was a free association word chain that began simply with the word cat.

How do you train this? Pick a word at random from a dictionary, and list out fifteen words in a free association word chain as quickly as possible. Then, do it again and again – verbally, because that will require the quickest thinking.

After you grow more comfortable with random free association with words, you can take the next step and choose two random words from a dictionary and pretend they are the name of a company. Then, create a short story about what that company does, as quickly as possible.

For example, the two random words you pick are: bottle, Africa. The short story I would construct about a company being named “Africa Bottle” is that they import African homemade liquors.

The final step of this set of free association exercises is to choose five random words from the dictionary and make up a story that involves all of the words, as quickly as possibly.

Again, these exercises are to train you think quickly and be creative, so it’s imperative that you do these exercises at “full speed.” They’ll be tough, and at first, you might imagine that your responses are terrible. But, imagine how big the difference will be between your first day and your tenth day, for example. That’s the power of free association, and practice.

If you also care to analyze the similarities between free association and conversation, you might find that they are virtually the same. In conversation, you’ll reply to someone on a topic, a slightly related topic, or a new topic. That’s exactly the type of thought process that free association takes. In a sense, you are training yourself to come up with conversation topics quickly.

The third method is to come up with a simple structure for yourself when you’re backed into a corner. For example, an easy response structure you can use for just about anything is to (1) restate what was said, (2) state an emotion, and (3) ask a question.

Here's how that looks in practice:

“So then I punched him in the face and all was well.”

“You punched him in the face? That must have been satisfying. How did it feel after?”

“Did you like the coffee?”

“Did I like the coffee? Well I'm in a great mood now, so I guess I did. What kind was it?”

“I hear the zoos here are amazing.”

“The zoos are amazing? That would make me so happy to see one. Do you want to go tomorrow?”

It's an easy template that allows you to respond to anything, even if your mind is blank, because it literally tells you what to say.

So much of the beauty in our lives is unplanned. It's because we are able to step outside of the boxes and limits in our heads, and explore things we wouldn't have otherwise. And what results is often amazing.

Over-planning and preparing is like a straitjacket for your conversation and rapport.

When you remove the possibility of spontaneity from your conversations, you might feel like you are safe from spectacular failure, but you also limit the potential of how high your conversation can soar.



The most memorable moments do not typically come from fixed destinations.

Here's a quick thought experiment that will bolster your sense of confidence in the face of unpredictability. Hopefully it will help you realize that you don't need an agenda, and that your worst case scenario is not really that bad.

Pick five topics that you know absolutely nothing about. Bring them up one by one with a friend. Commit to talking about for each topic for at least five minutes. See the various angles and routes you can go to make a topic interesting. Grasp for straws on how to keep a dialogue going. Notably, see how you can relate it to other topics, and see how easy it is to get sidetracked onto something else. There's not much to fear.



## Chapter 10. Support Your Teammates

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Since you are all working towards a shared goal, you are everyone else's best supporting actor and cheerleader to make them look good.*

The shared goal of an improv performance is to put on a good, entertaining, and engaging show for the audience and have a good time while doing it.

However, the only way you are going to be able to do that successfully on a consistent basis is to realize that you must support your teammates frequently and help them out. You must put them in positions to succeed, assist them with the scene, and implicitly give them guidance and direction.

In a sense, you must set them up to look good!

Here's what this looks like in an improv scene:

Actor: "So you're the boss of this restaurant?"

Good Supporting Actor: "Yes, I am... and I bet you're here to complain about something, aren't you?"

Actor: “Yes, I am...”

Good Supporting Actor: “It’s the meat, isn’t it? It’s cow meat, I swear.”

Actor: “Yes, the hamburgers are very suspect...”

Good Supporting Actor: “Suspect? Are you Sherlock Holmes? Why are you so suspicious, did the meat moo at you?”

Actor: “Yes... and it made lots of other noises.”

Good Supporting Actor: “Other noises? Well we fixed our bathroom this morning, so it couldn’t have been that. Although the mice have come back...”

What happened in that scene? The actor didn’t have much to say, or was tongue-tied and couldn’t think quickly on his feet in the scene’s context. The good supporting actor picked up on this and started to provide details and prompts as to where the actor could go. In essence, he assisted the actor in moving the scene along and kept feeding him lines and tangents to use. Where the actor could only restate the previous comment or ask a simple question, the good supporting actor filled in the rest of the details and made it easier for the actor.

At first glance, it might appear to be unfair that you are putting in so much more work than the other person, but it’s not like everyone you speak to will answer with only one word. Remember, thinking about the fairness and division of labor only happens when you lose focus that you both have one shared goal from the interaction.

*Their success is your success*, so that’s why it pays to be a wonderful supporting actor.

To be clear, it can be a lot more work than you might bargain for, but in improv comedy, people will always do the same for you in return when they sense that you need a hand. This isn’t

necessarily so in conversation, but if you can be enough of a supporting actor for both parties in a conversation, it will flow better anyway.

Here's how that former scene would look like if neither party was invested enough in the shared goal to make an effort:

Actor: "So you're the boss of this restaurant?"

Bad Supporting Actor: "Yup."

Actor: "I have an issue with the burgers."

Bad Supporting Actor: "What's wrong with them?"

Actor: "Something is wrong with the meat."

Bad Supporting Actor: "Is it bad?"

Actor: "Yes, and I feel sick already."

Bad Supporting Actor: "Sick how?"

That turns into a very different, much worse improv scene. I definitely wouldn't pay to watch that. Both parties are being slightly selfish and not contributing to the shared goal. Instead, they are being lazy and only putting in the minimum effort required to not be off-putting. If we assume that the above was a conversation versus an improv scene, it still wouldn't be out of place. We probably have similar interactions on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, that demonstrates the first important lesson of being a great supporting actor. You can't be lazy, and you have to put in more effort than the other person. Remember in grade school when you were split into groups, and all of your group members were the slackers of the class? It's just like that, where you will have to do the bulk of the work to make up for other people's conversational sloth. Your payoff is the

achievement of the shared goal and the fact that others will do the same for you on occasion.

How can you be an amazing supporting actor in conversations?

By shining the spotlight onto the other person and their thoughts.

Be the first to ask questions about them, but not just shallow, surface level questions. Don't stay on the who, how, what, where, when, and why. Ask questions about people's motivations, thoughts, stances, and internal train of thought. Try to ascertain people's emotions and attitudes towards the topic at hand and what those imply.

Initially, expect to be the person that asks 75% of the questions, and expect to be the person who speaks 66% of the time to give people prompts to open up with. This generally means you should be the one to take charge of the interaction, and keep the engine running if the other person lets it run cold. You are in charge of directing the topics and conversation's direction, and also shepherding the other person out of slower topics, toward more engaging subjects.

Keep focused on *their* topics, such as themselves, their interests, their friends, and their hobbies. Try to resist talking about yourself much, and in fact, maintain a 2:1 ratio of questions to stories about yourself, unless you are adding details to beef up their stories. Sharing about yourself doesn't contribute to the goal at hand for the time being, which supports them.

Ask for their opinions on topics "because you figured they might know something about it," validating and shining the

spotlight on them simultaneously. If the topic of conversation veers into territory of their expertise, let them know that you want to hear their opinion “because they know a lot about it.” In fact, try to direct the conversation there intentionally and let them share their expertise with you. This is all to encourage them to speak more easily and confidently.

People typically enjoy acting as a teacher and having their knowledge recognized by others, so put them into that position and ask them implicitly to teach you about those topics. In addition, people are never shy or short of words on topics they are experts on, especially if there is someone eager to learn from them.

You can also ask them specifically for recommendations on any range of topics, from interpersonal to professional. Make sure you are clear that you are asking them for a reason, and that you also explain why their recommendations are particularly helpful.

If they give you a one-word answer, add color and context to the answer to make it easier for them to expand on their answer. For example:

Good Supporting Actor: “So you like skiing?”

Actor: “Yup.”

Good Supporting Actor: “What do you like about it? I love the snow and the rush of speed. Or do you like all the cool gear and the ski lifts? A friend of mine really likes falling, weirdly. Are you like that too?”

Actor: “Well...”

You are continually on the hunt to extract more engagement from them. In some examples, it sounds like fake flattery or

sycophantic behavior, but it's merely commentary in reaching the shared goal of allowing your conversational teammate to open up and feel comfortable.

There's nothing manipulative about being a great supporting actor. You're not just telling them things to make them happy. You are finding the golden nuggets within everyone, and bringing them to light so that they can sparkle.

One final method to be a great supporting actor is to ensure that you incorporate the good, proper, and emotionally-calibrated reactions from the earlier chapter on reading and reacting. Recall that whatever someone is saying, they are doing it to create an emotional response, and there are actually very few reactions they might be seeking.

*Joy. Anger. Humor. Annoyance. Amazement. Curiosity.*

A story about being cut off in traffic? They likely want shared anger with a dash of humor. Proactively think about the underlying emotion that people want to evoke in you, and then give it to them. Jump on board with them.

Show the appropriate emotion in a way that makes them feel acknowledged and validated. This will go a long way toward supporting your conversational teammate, making them feel like you're on the same page and interested in what they have to share.

Always keep in mind that their success is your success, so making conversation as easy as possible for the other person will help you as well.



If you want a quick demonstration of how to support your conversational teammate, sit a friend down and bring up their five favorite topics. Ask them relevant questions about it, sit back and let them teach you and talk your ears off. You might even try to say as little as possible, while getting them to talk as much as possible.

The funny part is because you've supported them, they'll think it was amazing because they got to get on their soapbox and expound on their inner workings, which everyone loves.



## Chapter 11: Remember and Callback

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Reincorporate specific elements from earlier in the interaction in different contexts for big laughs and continuity.*

First things first: what is a callback?

A callback is a statement, question, or joke that refers to something that was mentioned earlier in the conversation. Essentially, the same element is mentioned in two different contexts.

Here's a quick example:

You mentioned how much you loved pasta earlier in the conversation, and the topic at hand now is how you want to buy new shoes. A callback is essentially finding any type of association or link between those two topics. What is possible here as a callback – anything that can make the two contexts relate or connect to each other?

- You love pasta, so you ate too much and need bigger shoes to fit your fat feet.
- A joke about how rich you are to be able to buy so much fancy pasta and new shoes.
- If you ate less pasta, you would be able to buy more expensive shoes.

It's important to note that these aren't necessarily jokes, they're just ways of making connections between a current topic and an older one. It's a shame that you are hearing these out of context, because it's more difficult to find the humor while reading or hearing them read out loud like a textbook.

Callbacks are one of the improv player's best tools because they accomplish so much for the scene in one move. The main purpose is to give the audience a greater sense of rapport with the people involved, and to create an inside joke that makes the performance feel personal. Indeed, the vast majority of callbacks can't be planned, and are truly like strikes of lightning. If you try to describe a callback to someone, it will probably lose most of the humor, and you will have to end the story by saying "you just had to be there."

The best part about callbacks is that you can recycle elements from the very same scene if you can simply keep a couple of points in your memory. The elements often don't appear to work together at all until you link them together, and the combination is often hilarious. As a result, you automatically appear intelligent, observant, and extremely witty for having fit a square peg into a round hole.

In an improv scene, this can be relatively easy because of the intentional amount of details that you and other people use. Creating a callback using two different details in the same scene can even be another detail in itself, and lead the scene in an entirely different direction. It's not much more difficult

during normal conversation, except for the fact that people aren't aware that callbacks are a possibility, so they don't seed the conversation with details for it. That means you'll have to pay more attention and look harder, but it's an easy skill to gain.

This chapter on callbacks isn't just about telling the same jokes or sticking to conversation patterns that have worked in the past. Rather, it's about how you can be intentional in setting yourself up to be funny all by yourself, and it's easier than you think.

The art of humorous callbacks in conversation is easy once you understand how to set it up. One of the most basic reasons humor works is that there is an element of surprise. Expectations are ignored or completely defied, which shocks people into an emotional reaction. If we can accept that this is the basis for much of humor, then callbacks introduce a higher level of surprise by linking two elements that have no business being close to each other.

Beyond the humor, there is one big psychological benefit to callbacks. You make people feel heard and important.

When you repeat an element that you and your conversation partner talked about earlier, this shows them in no uncertain terms that you were engaged and listening. You were so engaged, in fact, that you knew exactly what was said and can repeat it.

This drives home the point that they and whatever they said are important enough for you to take notice of and act on. Indeed, you have to be paying close attention to become good at callbacks since they require you to precisely repeat someone's points. Callbacks show your conversation partner

that you are observant and actually care about the conversation.

They also create a unique inside joke – a shared moment that no one else will ever be able to experience. If we take the example involving pasta and new shoes, then that is always going to be a set of topics that you can bring up with this person, reminding them of that day's conversation. Inside jokes are one of the highways to close friendship and rapport. It's something that only friends have, and friendship can be circular sometimes. That is, you are friends because you have jokes, but only friends can develop those types of jokes. You are able to leap over that process and build rapport more quickly if you become great at callbacks.

Finally, when you reincorporate elements from earlier points of the conversation, this gives you power to redirect the conversation as you please. If you wanted to go back to that earlier point, you can now easily segue into it.

It lends an air of familiarity to a conversation by going back to a previous subject. In a sense, it's also a safe way to change topics because you know the topic was already accepted. This gives you the best of both worlds because it allows you to keep the conversation from dragging by introducing something new. However, it is also something familiar, so the new direction is not seen as a random tangent that no one cares about.

Thus far, this chapter has been slightly abstract, so it's time to bring it down to earth. How do you create a callback? By creating a connection from one topic to another. That's it. It's like watching two different movies, then pretending that they exist in the same cinematic universe. What similarities or evidence could you find to prove that, or what would that assertion mean for each movie?

Let's suppose for instance that *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* exist in the same universe. In fact, they actually inhabit the same world. What could you say about how they relate to each other?

What would it mean for each respective movie?

- One side of the planet is somehow far more technologically advanced than the other.
- Luke Skywalker and Frodo Baggins (the respective main protagonists) would be best friends.
- Han Solo and the grumpy dwarf Gimli might hate each other.
- Chewbacca could become Gandalf the Wizard's mascot.
- The Death Star from *Star Wars* is really what Sauron's eye is.
- Light sabers from *Star Wars* can kill ghosts and wraiths from *The Lord of the Rings*. And so on.
- Can wizards travel through space?
- Is "the force" from *Star Wars* similar to the magic of a wizard?
- Would Princess Leia still be a princess in *The Lord of the Rings*?

At the beginning, it's an exercise in creative thinking, but it gets easier when you practice. You are only making connections and exploring how the two topics would merge together. These are all great little comments or retorts for any conversation that happens to talk about these two movies.

One of the best means of practicing is to compare the plots of two different movies or television shows.

Again, pretend they are all in the same universe, and that there is a hidden connection for you to find. What can you come up with? Humans are designed to see patterns and make connections between things, especially if we believe that there are patterns to find. In the beginning, it was an exercise in creative thinking, but callbacks actually practices paying closer attention to our context and surroundings.

Here are three more examples:

Old topic: I like *Star Trek* (science fiction television show)

Current topic: I like *E.R.* (medical drama television show)

Callback: Too bad *E.R.* doesn't have the futuristic medical devices from *Star Trek*.

Old topic: I love puppies.

Current topic: I hate rollercoasters.

Callback: You and your puppy can hide under the bed when we go to the amusement park.

Old topic: The coffee here is great.

Current topic: Buying a new leather chair.

Callback: I could even drink that coffee on this chair and it wouldn't stain. Perfect.

Remember that a callback, for how complicated it can sound, is to make a connection between two different topics in a novel way. You don't need to try to be funny or novel because you will be naturally by virtue of combining two elements that are never related.





## Chapter 12: Shut Up More

*Rule of Improv Comedy: Improv comedy is about playing off others, and you can't do that if you are constantly waiting for your turn to talk, and not listening to others. Shut up more.*

Raise your hand if this has ever happened to you: you are speaking with someone, and immediately after you finished speaking, they ignored absolutely everything you said, don't even acknowledge it, and continue on their separate thought or tangent? It's as if they didn't hear a word of what you said, and they probably didn't.

Can you imagine this happening during an improv performance?

Actor #1: "I want to go to the butcher shop now, so let's go!"

Actor #2: "This table is fascinating. Do you think it was made in Germany?"

Actor #1: "Uh..."

Actor #1 would be left confused and scrambling.  
Unfortunately, if we're honest with ourselves, this type of

interaction is common and happens often. For all of our good intentions, most people are terrible listeners. They want to say what they want to say, and they are more interested in their own lives than anyone else's. To them, sharing is caring, not listening.

This is normal human nature, but this book is about reaching extraordinary conversations and interactions, so we need to stop the habit of not listening and simply shut up more. Remember that we always have that one shared goal, whether it be in an improv performance or conversation, and listening better is a huge step to that.

Real conversations are two-way streets, and you have to give space in order to receive it for yourself. Unfortunately, for many people (hopefully not you), conversation is seen as a dumping ground. This will happen one of two ways.

They will either come in with a fixed agenda and set of talking points, or they will be so wrapped up in their own lives that they just want to share it with you and not hear about yours. In either case, they open their mouths, unload information, and don't stop talking until they get tired of their own voices.

How does this make the listener feel? They get the distinct feeling that the other person is just waiting for their turn to speak, and are not interested in anything they have to say. It's like they know they are doing their best to try to listen to you, but they feel that their lives are so much more captivating that they can't resist going back to that topic.

The listeners are not getting much out of the exchange, and at some point only listening to someone and having your prompts ignored is burdensome and flat-out annoying. In an improv performance, the two parties won't be working together, and

the scene will be disjointed as one person will have to keep catering to the other person's whims.

To master the art of conversation, understand that silence is an effective communication tool. Use it more frequently than you think you should. If anyone you engage with happily answers your questions about them, but doesn't pause to ask you how you're doing, then they need to shut up more. If that's you, then you're the one who needs to shut up more.

It can be difficult because sometimes we build up a lot of steam during conversations. We feel like we're on a roll with what we're talking about, and we could talk about it for hours. That's a selfish pursuit, and if someone wants to hog the spotlight for a while, you must absolutely surrender the spotlight and be willing to derail yourself and jump completely into someone else's ideas and topics.

Therefore, in conversation, one of the first keys is that you don't just wait for your turn to speak. To some, this sounds like "let people speak and don't interrupt them," but it goes deeper than that.

This actually means to empty your mind and stop composing your response or the next topic while someone is speaking. When you are listening, you aren't only waiting for your turn to speak and preparing for that. You are listening with a blank slate, and then tailoring your response directly to what was just said.

If you are letting the other person speak simply because you feel like you shouldn't be speaking for so long at ones stretch, you are just waiting for your turn to speak. You aren't participating in a conversation, you are giving a monologue in the hopes that the other person contributes and listens to it. Or worse yet, the other person listens in a similar fashion to you,

and you are in a case of dueling monologues versus a dialogue.

Worse yet, you are not respecting them. It tells them that you do not value them enough to listen to them while you are waiting for your turn to unload what it is you have to say. Much of this is subconscious, so it would be wrong to say that we are malicious in our daily conversations. We just get too eager sometimes to talk about ourselves because our lives are most interesting to us, so why wouldn't they be to others?

We're like puppies discovering snow for the first time and are unable to contain our excitement.

We already had an example of poor listening at the outset of the chapter. However, it was egregious, and most examples of poor listening are more subtle and would merely be classified as "ineffective."

Ineffective listening:

Bob: I heard that butcher shop is pretty good.

Johnson: Oh, cool. Where is it?

Bob: About a ten-minute walk.

Johnson: Oh, I see. Did I tell you about my new niece?

Bob: No, you didn't. Congratulations.

Johnson: She's really cute. Here are some pictures.

The reason this is ineffective listening is because Johnson merely pays lip service to Bob's interests, before being unable to contain himself about from talking about his niece. He doesn't see Bob's thought to completion and cuts him off in the middle to shift to his own topic. This is the type of poor

listening that we encounter more on a daily basis. It's subtle, but just as bad sometimes.

Here is that conversation, but with better listening, a focus on Bob, and seeing his topic to completion:

Bob: I heard that butcher shop is pretty good.

Johnson: Oh, cool. Where is it?

Bob: About a ten-minute walk.

Johnson: Oh, I see. Did you want to check it out?

Bob: I do. Do you want to come with me?

Johnson: Sure. Along the way, I can show you pictures of my new niece.

Both parties are able to wedge their thoughts in. Conversation that improves relationships and makes people feel positively about each other involves an interplay between silence and speaking, and both parties have an equal opportunity to take the spotlight.

Collaboration is the name of the game, and waiting for your turn to speak doesn't contribute to a shared goal – only yours.

Interrupting, of course, is also a no-no in the quest for better listening. Interrupting sends the message of, "I know you were talking, but what I have to say is more interesting for both of us," or, "What I'm saying is more important than what you say." Again, it's not conscious, but that's what happens when we put our thoughts and agendas over those of other people.

You might think it's a big deal, but if you keep interrupting, that is precisely the message you send. Your conversation partner doesn't know what's going on inside your head, so

who can blame them for feeling alienated if your actions don't represent your intentions?

Here are a few quick guidelines for interruptions. First, don't interrupt others unless you agree with them so emphatically that you can finish their sentence with them. Second, if you do interrupt them for any reason, ask them immediately after you finish speaking what they were saying and bring it back to them. Acknowledge your error and quickly put the spotlight back onto them.

Third, try to abide by the two-second rule to police yourself. After someone finishes speaking, pause for a full two seconds while contemplating what they've said and externally demonstrate that you are analyzing their words. Then, and only then, may you reply. This will get you into the habit of thinking before speaking and addressing people first.

You can also get into the habit of using phrases that encourage them to keep speaking. It's not always enough to just shut up and nod your head. Staring blankly at someone will make people feel like they have to repeat themselves and that their message didn't get through. It has the same exact effect as not listening to them.

You have to demonstrate that you are mentally following every step of the conversation, even if you aren't. Use your facial expressions, eyebrows, gestures, and laughs to signal a reaction to each of their statements. Nod when they emphasize a point.

Use encouraging phrases such as the following to show interest and investment:

- Uh huh.
- I see.

- That's interesting.
- Tell me more.
- And then?
- What happened next?
- What about that?

People who are simply looking to be heard are users with few exceptions. These people are self-absorbed and use others for their ears to feel good about themselves.

If you look at conversations as simply an exercise to be heard and shine a spotlight on your ego, you are doing a great disservice to the person you talk to. Not everyone is as interested in your life as you are. Even if you think you are listening and shutting up sufficiently, there's a chance that you still cling to your train of thought subconsciously and are waiting for the opportunity to assert them.

To improve your conversations, you just need to shut up more. This might be the simplest lesson of the book. As the old saying goes, you can't learn when you're speaking, and overdoing it makes you fundamentally unlikable.

To see the simple power of shutting up more, make your next conversation with a friend all about them. Try to find out about every minute detail of their day. This means you shutting up, listening to them, reacting accordingly, and asking questions that go deeper. Say as little as you can while reacting properly, and moving the conversation along in whatever direction they want. Make it as unbalanced a conversation as possible.

Don't interrupt them, and try to coax as many stories from them as possible. Note how willing they are to speak about themselves in detail.



Is this easy or difficult for you? Did it feel unnatural to ask people deeply about their day and focus on them? If it did, then you just might need to practice shutting up more!



## Chapter 13: Use HPM

*Rule of Improv Comedy: If all else fails, talk about history, philosophy, or metaphor.*

One of the most powerful techniques you can adopt from improv comedy is HPM.

Conversations can hit rough spots that can easily spiral out of control. These rough spots can lead to dead ends that may kill the conversation. Sometimes all the energy and vibrancy of the conversation can evaporate almost instantaneously. You don't know exactly what your conversation partner just said, so you don't know how to reply. You end up just saying, "Yeah..." and awkward silence ensues.

What can you do when your mind blanks and you look around desperately trying to think of something to say?

Imagine how alarming this would be in an improv performance. Let's set the stage: you are onstage with four other performers, and there are over one hundred people in the audience. The spotlight is on you, and the longer you pause, the hotter you become and the more sweat drips down your

face. You feel like your face is going to explode from all the blood that has suddenly rushed there.

Luckily, you remember HPM and blurt out something and the performance carries on without missing a beat.

These situations are why HPM is so important.

HPM is like a mental template you can use to put a creative spin on your conversation or rescue it from certain peril. It's a concept that can apply to any topic and in any context, and most importantly, you don't need special training, information, or intelligence to use it. HPM represents aspects of life that everyone can relate to, and thus is universal. In short, this means HPM can help you regardless of your circumstances.

Frequent and proper usage of HPM can mean the difference between your conversation crashing and burning, or being kicked into a higher gear. If you want to have better, more personal, and more vibrant conversations, just remember HPM.

What is HPM? It's an acronym that stands for History, Philosophy, and Metaphor, each of which is a type of reply you can use for any purpose.

The significance of these three replies is that they are things that everyone has. Thus, you can address the history, philosophy, or metaphor of almost anything that was just said. Let's dive into each of these individually and how you can use them.

## **History**

History is when you respond to whatever was said in a personal way. You talk about your personal experience, story, or exposure with the topic at hand in any way. This is an occasion where your life intersected with the topic at hand.

The history response necessitates a certain amount of opening up. This can be difficult for people not accustomed to talking about themselves, but as we've discussed throughout this book, you need to provide details and information about yourself for people to connect with.

For example, how might you respond with history if the topic at hand is how your friend lost his sunglasses after going on a rollercoaster? "I hate rollercoasters now. I can't believe I lost my \$250 sunglasses last time I went on one!"

In that context, there are three topics that you can address with your personal history: sunglasses, rollercoasters, and losing things.

Accordingly, your response that invokes your personal history might be something like, "Yeah, I remember the last time I went on a rollercoaster, I almost threw up because it was so intense!"

Or, "That reminds me of the time a monkey stole my sunglasses in Bali. I think we need straps for our sunglasses."

Or, "That stinks. I lost my favorite hat last week, too. The sun is our enemy now."

The history angle draws its power from the fact that there is personal involvement. If somebody uses this technique on you, you'd feel more open and engaged with them since sharing personal stories and details is something that friends do. You also demonstrate your similarity by relating a story that contains the same elements as their story or statement.

Here's another example: "I'm going to backpack through Europe this summer."

There are three elements for you to share something personal with: backpacking, Europe, and summer plans.

"I actually went backpacking through Peru last summer. It was so fun!"

"Europe is so cool! I just read that they have new laws on travel."

"I wish my summer plans were so great, I'm just going to be mowing lawns and working at McDonald's."

One word of caution: you can't use the history reply over and over again without a break. You'll be hijacking the conversation and diminishing whatever the other person is trying to say. In a sense, using this reply too much can make you a conversational narcissist, because everything will end up in a reply back to your life, which people may not always care about. Thus, this must be used with self-awareness and calibration to how excited the other person is about their chosen topics.

One more example: "I love watching soccer, it's definitely my favorite sport to watch!"

“I used to play soccer as a kid, and actually broke my leg from it, but I like watching too.”

## **Philosophy**

By philosophy, I don't mean an abstract theoretical argument about what life and existence are. Philosophy in this context refers to personal opinions, stances, beliefs, and attitudes towards the topic at hand.

The philosophy angle is where you demonstrate how you feel about something, for better or worse. Often, the stronger you feel about something, the more this engenders additional conversation. Just say how you feel about the topic!

We can use the same example from before – someone losing their sunglasses after going on a rollercoaster.

Your philosophy angle response would be something akin to “Oh my God, losing things and the tiny probability of dying on a rollercoaster are why I hate them. I get my adrenaline kicks elsewhere!”

Or, “That's why I'm a believer in cheap, crappy sunglasses. They get the job done.”

Or, “I'm deathly afraid of rollercoasters, I'm so amazed by anyone that goes on them.”

It brings home the point that what the other person said resonated with this person enough to share their philosophy and opinion on something. This is intimate and not hard for

the person who made the statement you are commenting on to feel drawn to you for opening up that way.

Chances are that you don't feel completely comfortable sharing your opinions because you don't want to be judged, but that's precisely why this response is so important. People are rarely forthright about how they feel about matters and topics, so expressing your philosophy or opinion is great conversation ignition.

However, you can cheapen this and send the wrong message by overdoing it. If every topic is met with a highly visceral emotional reaction, then the act grows old quickly and you appear unstable and severely judgmental.

Here's another example: "I love watching soccer, it's definitely my favorite sport to watch!"

"I love soccer too. My favorite sport ever since I was a child."

"I hate soccer because it's so slow! What's the secret?"

"I've never really watched sports, it feels like I'm being lazy when I could go outside and play the sport."

## **Metaphor**

This is a loose definition of metaphor, to be sure. A typical metaphor is essentially how similar something is to something else. People also tend to use analogies and metaphors interchangeably, even though they aren't the same thing.



It's a matter of semantics. When I use metaphor in the context of HPM, I simply want the response to be what the topic at hand makes you think of. What can you compare it to, what is similar, and what does it remind you of? It's a much easier way of formulating responses, and yet it also manages to be universal, as any subject can always make us think of other topics. It's just a type of thinking that we have to train with exercises, like free association, that were mentioned earlier in the book.

Here's what it looks like using the example where someone loses a pair of sunglasses after riding a rollercoaster:

“Rollercoasters are like charities, I donate so many things because I lose something every time I ride one!”

Or, “Losing things is like when you have a rock in your shoe, it's so annoying.”

Or, “Sunglasses are my savior on most days, I would be lost without them.”

Or, “It reminds me of how dogs look for the tennis ball when you pretend to throw it.”

As you can see, the metaphor doesn't have to be *good* or even really logical. It just has to follow from the topic at hand, and brings another angle in to be discussed. As with the chapter on callbacks, this is also you linking two previously unrelated topics and putting them together in a way that is probably unique and interesting.

It also tells the other person that you are interested to the point that you can distill the topic at hand, and then relate the main

traits to another topic. To most people, that appears to require deep engagement and analysis, when in reality you are just thinking, “What does this topic make me think of and why?”

Metaphors are great springboards to other topics while maintaining the flow of conversation. There are a couple of caveats, however. First, you should try to ensure that the topics that you are reminded of are relateable, and might also be of interest to the other person. If you keep changing the topic to things that the other person has no interest in, it’s off-putting. Second, you should make sure to not overuse metaphors. You might seem like you have an attention deficit disorder and have trouble focusing on anything.

As you’ve read, when you practice and use HPM correctly, you will never run out of things to say, ever. But, you don’t need to use it just as a last resort. HPM works because it is universal – everyone has beliefs and thoughts on daily occurrences, and everyone has stories about their daily lives that they enjoy sharing.

HPM is a framework for sharing relatable topics that become the low hanging fruit for conversations to begin and go deeper.

I’ve implied this but not made it explicit: you can’t repeatedly cycle from HPM during conversations. It creates a conversation that is too disjointed and random to follow. However, a common conversation structure that I teach goes something like the following:

*H Q Q Q*

*P Q Q Q*

*M Q Q Q*

where Q stands for question. This structure means that you are essentially asking three questions for every time that you talk about yourself or change the subject. This is a way of making sure that you aren't alienating others, yet still can bring in these unique perspectives and pieces of information. It gives you conversational diversity and allows you to use these replies while still staying focused on the other person.

HPM is like reading from a script of what you should say next. If you lose your place, just start at the beginning. Use it and love it.

HPM doesn't come without practice, however. The best way to do this is through repetition. You can look through a recent string of text messages and write down a list of five general topics. Then, come up with five H, five P, and five M for each of the topics. You'll see what works for you and how you like to construct these replies for yourself.

This will be difficult at first, but deep connections aren't built by talking about the weather. Deep connections are built with shared values, beliefs, and opinions. HPM cuts to the core and addresses all of those at once.



## Chapter 14. Improv Potpourri

If you ask me (though no one ever does), there is a fairly effective array of improv comedy rules presented in this book and how they apply to normal, everyday conversations.

The thing to always remember is that you should be collaborating with your conversation partner instead of fighting for airtime. I repeat it here because it's something that, even if you think you're doing it, you're probably not as much as you should.

I want this final chapter to be a jumble of additional improv comedy techniques that I didn't manage to devote to an entire chapter to, but are important nonetheless. Of course, for some these might be more important, but it all depends where you're coming from and what your weaknesses and strengths are.

***Rule of Improv Comedy: Be as present and observant as possible, so you can read the subtext and know where people want to go.***

This is a rule about paying attention to other people and stepping outside of your own head. Again, it might feel

repetitive, but coming at it from slightly different angles each time is bound to affect the maximum amount of people possible.

What does being present and observant mean? The vast majority of us almost always have two tracks of thought while in a conversation. The first track is what's happening in front of us, what the other person is saying, what they are doing, and the general real-life experience.

The second track happens exclusively in our heads. It's where we are preparing what to say, thinking of how to reply, and generally not paying attention to the other person because we are caught up in planning.

Unfortunately, the more uneasy you are in conversation, the more you increasingly will retreat to your second track, which obviously is counterproductive for what you're trying to accomplish with the conversation. It's your safety net, but this rule of improv tells you to do the exact opposite: ditch the safety net and pay attention to the other person, because *that's* what is going to help you prepare and plan responses.

It's much, much easier to react directly to what someone says than to pay only half attention, and then say something that you prepared in your head but that doesn't completely apply to the statement or question.

What can you see when you step outside of your head and examine and observe the other person during a conversation? You can see subtext better, read their body language, analyze their facial expressions, and listen more carefully. You'll understand exactly what they're saying, and you'll be able to reply directly to that.

It's a little more stressful to essentially go without your crutch, but imagine how being in your head would play out in an improv performance. The performers simply can't construct a good scene if they're not willing to shut down their internal monologue and focus on other people's words.

Finally, if you're in your head too much, people will see it and notice. They'll think you're being aloof or obtuse when you are just trying to make sure you come off charming. It's hurting you! ***Just listen, dang it.***

Here's a quick exercise to improve your observation skills and see what you are probably missing if you're in your head too much.

Go out in a public space and sit somewhere where you can watch people interact with each other. You may not hear what they're saying, but you can try to make sense of the interaction through body language, facial expressions, gestures, and anything else you can analyze visually.

Can you see which party wants to talk more, and which party is getting bored? Is there attraction, hatred, fakeness, or other hidden emotions that you can observe and pick out? I bet you can. This might be the first time that you have focused entirely on observing others and figuring out what the context is, and outside of your own head.

***Rule of Improv Comedy: Make specific statements.***

You might consider this an extension of the previous rules of being more specific and providing as many details as possible. Instead of asking an open-ended question, a specific statement is even better.

Questions in general put the burden of conversation on the other person because they are using their brain power to come up with an answer. The more broad the question, the bigger the burden, since they have to first interpret the question before answering it.

In an improv scene, asking a question like, “What’s your story?” is going to kill the scene because the recipient of your question has to stop everything and come up with an entire backstory. By contrast, a specific statement would give the recipient something to actually react to.

Here’s that broad question:

“What’s your story?”

“Oh! Um, well... my name is Jack, and I’m a lumber... jack.”

And here’s that specific statement:

“So, I hear you’re a lumberjack named Jack.”

“That’s right! My axe is made of wood and my horse is named Cow.”

See the difference in response?

It’s the same in conversation. Instead of asking a broad question, just make an assumption about something and state it as a question. It will be an assertion that people can clarify if you’re wrong, and elaborate on if you’re right. For example, in lieu of asking, “What are your hobbies?” you can say:

“You seem like you’re really into cars.”



“I am, how did you know that? It started from childhood because my father owned a Corvette that he fixed up.”

“You seem like you’re really into cars.”

“Not really, what made you think that? I actually don’t even own a car.”

Be specific and make it easy for your conversation partner.

***Rule of Improv Comedy: You don’t need to be funny.***

This is one of the biggest mistakes that people new to improv comedy tend to make. They think that their responses need to be actually funny, as opposed to just flowing with the scene.

Not every statement has to make a profoundly funny impact or make people laugh. Remember, each statement or question of yours is designed to reach that shared goal of a pleasurable interaction and keep the flow going. That will not happen if you continually try to crack jokes, which by definition disrupts flow and turns the attention to yourself.

To all newbie improv-ers, you don’t need to be funny! Let the situation you’ve created and context take care of that for you. All you need to do is react to what’s happening. Jokes also don’t add anything to the scene and can actively take away from the forward momentum. Remember that concept of flow? A joke is a selfish move away from it.

Now, conversationalists, same message to you. You don’t need to always go for the home run. You can even look at some statements or questions as “filler,” but that’s okay because conversation isn’t a stage for you to showcase your wits. If

you want to do that, head to the nearest open-mic for standup comedy.

If you're *actually* funny, this may work. You still have to pick your spots, because it's exhausting speaking with someone that can never address your question or statement, and instead has to make a joke out of it. For the record, only a very tiny percentage of people are actually funny enough on a consistent basis to do this. I would not include myself in that percentage. If you're not funny but think you are, you have probably been given the label of "that guy" or "that girl" already behind your back, and that will take care of itself eventually.

Assuming that you're not a professional comedian, lay off the puns and jokes and just stay in the flow of things. Focus on observing the other person, the context of the topics, the stories, the absurdity of everyday life, and the people that are involved. They are going to be funnier than any of your jokes.

***Rule of Improv Comedy: You must practice. There's a reason why people involved in improv comedy are called players, and why performances are treated like sports matches.***

Surprise, surprise. Very little in this book will come easily if you don't practice it at least a few times.

There are some things you can put into practice immediately, but ultimately, you have to understand that to get truly good at anything, you have to practice, practice and practice.

Excellence does not happen overnight. What do improv players have to practice?

Timing, reaction to others, ignoring their normal instincts, being more specific, thinking on their feet, how to deal with certain situations and topics, what their comfort zones are, what they are good at, what they are bad at, reading other people... They literally can never practice enough because there are so many variables in human interaction.

What makes you think that conversation, which involves all of those same elements, would be so easy?

Just because you step up to the plate does not necessarily mean you are going to hit the ball. In many cases, you have to strike out before you hit a home run. There's a reason many professional improv performers and standup comedians say that you have to get through your first hundred times on stage before you will be able to know yourself. It's why Malcolm Gladwell preaches the value of the 10,000-hour rule, which means that it generally takes 10,000 hours of practice to master a skill. It's a process, and there's no shortcut. Where are you in that process?

You have to pay your dues, and the same applies to great conversation skills.

If there is any saving grace in the demanding process of practice, you will eventually reach your point of *momentum*. This will instill additional confidence in you, and confidence is a key component of skill.

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with people who are bad conversationalists. They have the same hardware as you. They have the same capacity for excellence. They only lack one thing. They do not want to try, or they have tried and tried, failed, and they do not want to try again. They experience discomfort, unfamiliarity, and awkwardness and decide that they can't take it anymore and don't want to face it.

What are the real negative consequences here? Feeling awkward and embarrassed for a couple of minutes? That's a very small price to pay to unlock the conversation skills that can literally change your life.

The biggest and most underrated element for making practice productive is the immediate feedback you can receive during it.

That's the only way to know that you are off-course, and how you can steer back into the correct and optimal way of doing things.

That's the problem with the practice habits of many people. They are not intentional about what they are doing, and end up doing the same thing over and over. That's not productive practice, and will mostly serve to reinforce bad habits.

People need to embrace intentionality, know exactly what they are doing, and what they should be working on when they practice. This becomes much easier with a practice and accountability partner, and preferably one that knows what you are working on.

It's also the only way that you can receive immediate feedback. This is important because the more delayed feedback is from the actual practice, the less effective it is. People forget what they were working on, and they can't tell the difference from the correct way and the way they were used to. Seeing immediate improvement makes all the difference in making practice stick in someone's head.

For example, you're trying to learn how to shoot a basketball. What's more helpful, a coach being present to see you shoot, immediately make changes to your form, and make sure that you adhere to them? Or for a coach to listen to you talk about your form, and try to make changes verbally a week later?

Practice makes perfect.



## **Conclusion**

It should be abundantly clear at this point that improv comedy functions almost parallel to memorable conversations.

When you think about it, even on a shallow level, they have so much in common.

They have the same premise: an interaction has the potential to be great and memorable, if the two parties can interact with each other to create enough flow.

They have the same path to greatness and memorability – rules and techniques to make sure that there is maximum flow, collaboration, and adaptability.

They even have the same shared goal – an interaction that is greatly enjoyed by both parts with the potential to lead to deeper connections.

Why not apply improv comedy frameworks that years of intensive practice have produced to our conversation skills?

It's my hope and desire that you learn from the rules within, but go a step beyond and seek out your own ways to create conversational flow. The best rules are the rules that work for you, as everyone's mind works a slightly different way. A one-size-fits-all set of rules isn't perfect for everyone.

In the meantime, upon discovering how difficult these principles are, I'll send another vote of respect to Will Ferrell.

Sincerely,

Patrick King

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P.S. If you enjoyed this book, please don't be shy and drop me a line, leave a review, or both! I love reading feedback, and reviews are the lifeblood of Kindle books, so they are always welcome and greatly appreciated.

**Other books by Patrick King include:**

[Laugh Tactics: Master Conversational Humor and Be Funny. On Command - Think Quickly On Your Feet](#)





## Cheat Sheet

Before devouring the cheat sheet, remember as a **FREE** show of appreciation to my readers, I've got **TWO** great resources for you:

[>> CLICK HERE For The Flawless Interaction Checklist and Better Conversations Worksheet! <<](#)

*The Checklist* describes in-depth the 7 essential components to exceptional interactions and conversations between you and everyone from a stranger to your partner – and *The Worksheet* puts a few of those components to the test with practice exercises that will *instantly* upgrade any conversation.

[CLICK HERE to download your FREE copy now!](#)

## [Chapter 1. Improvisation Implementation](#)

A flowing conversation greatly resembles a great improv comedy performance in many ways, and as such, most of the same principles should be used in both. There is one shared goal that is reached through collaboration.

## [Chapter 2. Always say “Yes, AND...”](#)

People say things for a reason, so you should continue along their line of thought until you find the reason. You can also help them find it by adding detail and color to a statement instead of just accepting it.

## [Chapter 3. Read and React to Everything](#)

Again, there is always a reason that something was said or done. It's up to you to pick up those breadcrumbs that people are leaving for you because very few will actually say what they are thinking. Then, it's up to you to react appropriately by thinking about the primary emotion that is being sought.

## [Chapter 4. Be More Specific](#)

The more specific you are with your questions and replies, the easier you will make conversation for the other person, and the better it will flow for both parties. Their success is your success.

## [Chapter 5. Details, Details, Details](#)

Whenever possible, use details to give life to a story or statement and give others something specific to latch onto and relate to. Details summon emotion.

### Chapter 6. No “No”

Never outright reject or contradict someone because it's very detrimental for conversational flow, which is one of the overarching goals. It also causes defensiveness, which makes people raise their guards.

### Chapter 7. Create Motion

No good improv scene ends where it starts, and no conversation should stay stagnant on the same thread or topic the entire time without going somewhere different or taking a different angle on it.

### Chapter 8. It's Entertainment, Not Discussion

This is a fundamental change in how you approach conversation. There are at least two different ways to respond to anything, and you are probably stuck in discussion mode versus entertainment mode.

### Chapter 9. Think On Your Feet

Thinking on your feet can be scary because we want to rely on composing our thoughts mentally before we speak. But it's how you become more present and charismatic. Free association exercises can help immensely with thinking on your feet.

## [Chapter 10. Support Your Teammates](#)

Every improv actor is essentially a supporting actor whose goal is to make the scene great. This means jumping in where needed, collaborating, bailing a teammate out, and setting them up for continued success. You can do the exact same in conversation.

## [Chapter 11: Remember and Callback](#)

A callback is a comedic structure where you essentially combine two elements together that are unrelated. All it takes is a passing memory of topics you've discussed before, and finding a connection to the current topic at hand.

## [Chapter 12: Shut Up More](#)

It's hard to learn, listen, and react properly to someone if you're talking the whole time. Just shut up more.

## [Chapter 13: Use HPM](#)

HPM stands for History, Philosophy, and Metaphor. It provides you a specific framework for what to say when your mind blanks. You might not be able to remember what you did over the weekend, but you'll be fine if you can just remember HPM.

## [Chapter 14. Improv Potpourri](#)

You must practice (sorry), you don't need to try to be funny, be as present as possible, and make specific statements whenever appropriate.