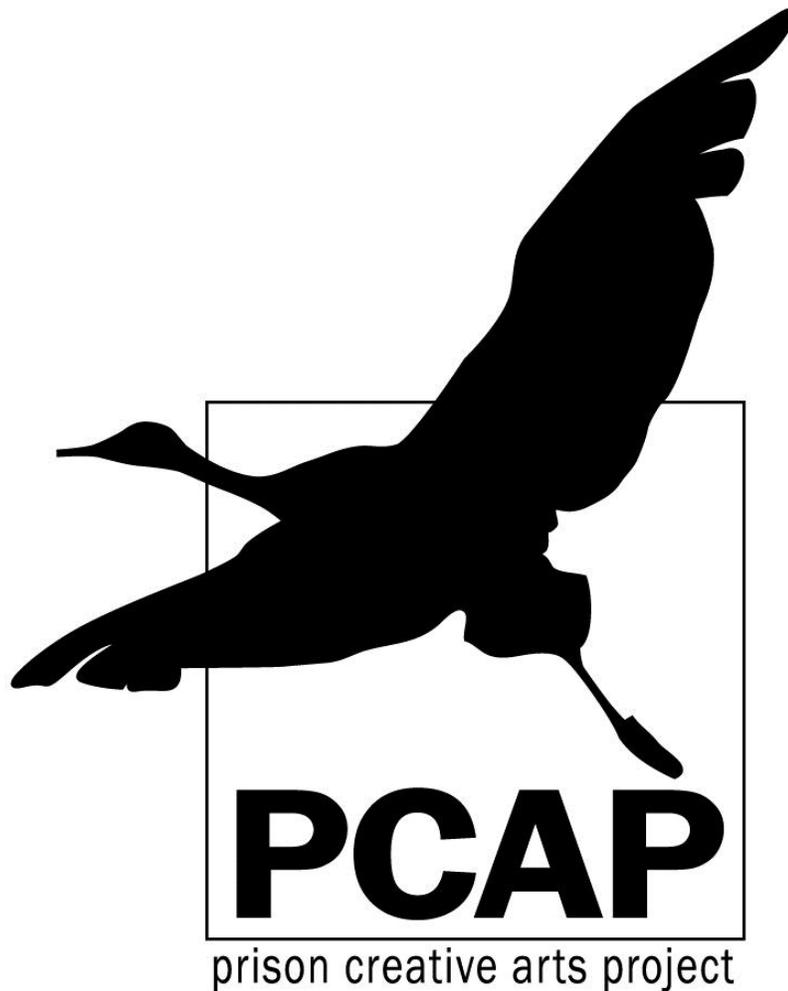


PCAP EXERCISE INVENTORY

2012



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THEATER

Some **categories**, to help you find what you need:

Warmup

Exercise works best in the first couple weeks or at the beginning of a workshop in order to loosen up the group.

Physical

Exercise gets people moving around a lot, heart rates up, etc.

Vocal

Exercise usually demands that group members project their voices or be precise with their inflections.

Concentration

Exercise demands that participants use subtlety in their actions or restraint in their movements/voice.

Group-Building

Demands that people work together or learn about each other.

Improv

Exercise includes the active creation of scenes, not just sound or motion practice .

Character/Scene Creation

Exercise is good to use if you are trying to create characters or scenes from scratch.

Storytelling

Exercise emphasizes narrative creativity, which may give ideas for scenes or characters.

Character Depth

Exercise deepens shallow/clichéd characters

Now, the *exercises*:

Drop Your Cool Card (A.K.A. Shake the demons A.K.A. Shake it out)

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Move around and scream maniacally. This works well if you have people in the group "too cool" to participate. A good way to start the first workshop or every workshop.

Sound and Motion

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Circle up. One person makes a simultaneous sound and motion, preferably nonsensical. The person next to them repeats this same sound and motion, and on and on around the circle, until the creator of that sound/motion has to do it again.
- The person next to them has to think of a new sound/motion. Repeat until everyone has had a turn.

Sound and Motion with Names

- Similar to previous exercise with the exception that each person's sound is his or her own name
- After everyone has gone around the circle and said their name with a motion, you then can pass the sound/motion around the room to make sure everyone knows everyone else's name
- One person starts by saying their name and their motion, then saying someone else's name and motion
- Whoever they say then says their name and motion and then the name and motion of another person in the circle
- This continues until you are confident everyone knows everyone else's name.

Machine

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Improv, Group-Building)

- A PCAP favorite, this is a collaborative "sound and motion." It begins by one of the braver members going to the middle of the room and performing their sound/motion. They must do this continuously throughout the exercise.
- One by one, the other group members add on "parts" by performing a sound/motion that somehow connects to the previous parts of the machine.
- The exercise is completed when everyone has joined in.
- *Variation:* Choose a theme ahead of time. Examples: a "love," "friendship," or "summer" machine, or if you're up for it, a less abstract concept; a "dentist" machine, perhaps?

Big Booty

(Warmup, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Everyone in a circle. One player is Big Booty. The others, going clockwise, are numbered: 1, 2, 3 and so on. Now Big Booty establishes a 4-beat rhythm, saying Big Booty, Big Booty, Big Booty (followed by a rest) - repeat this until everyone gets the rhythm.
- The game then goes as follows: Big Booty passes the buck to someone else, saying Big Booty to 7 (say) (this takes 2 beats, one for saying 'Big Booty' and one for saying 'to 7'). Number 7 then passes in 2 beats to, say number 2, saying '7 to 2'. It then continues until someone makes a mistake: if and when that happens everyone says (in 2 beats) 'Oh Shit', after which we repeat Big Booty Big Booty Big Booty (+ rest on 4th beat), twice.
- After that, the player that made the mistake becomes Big Booty, and everyone's number changes. New Big Booty starts the game again."

Building an Emotion

(Warmup, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Circle up. The first person simply says a word, with no inflection--'yay', perhaps. The second person adds some inflection of their choice: 'Yay!' The third person then would add some sort of action to that sound: 'Yay!', they yell, as they jump up. Then, more and more people add on to this core emotion with increasing excitement and energy.

Pulse

(Warmup, Concentration, Physical, Group-Building)

- Circle up. The pulse is passed in non-touching ways such as clapping, stomping, or even smiling (ask the people in the group to be creative and come up with something).
- A clap pulse would start with one person clapping once then the next person clapping once and so on until it comes back to the starter.
- The pulse can be sped up, slowed down, add a stomp to it, change direction...

Duck and Cover

(Warmup, Physical, Group-Building)

- Great for learning/remembering names.
- One person stands in the middle of the circle and points to someone and says their name. The person who is named ducks down and the people on either side of the person ducking have to name each other. The person who either cannot name the other person or names them second has to go in the middle.

Giants, Wizards, Dwarves

(Warmup, Group-Building)

- A creative “rock, paper, scissors” game. Giants beat dwarves, wizards beat giants, and dwarves beat wizards (but you knew that).
- Giants are represented by raising both arms straight up above your head. Wizards are represented by sticking both arms straight out in front of you and wiggling your fingers. Dwarves, of course, squat down.
- Divide the group into two teams. Each team decides their “character” and then gets into two lines, facing each other. Everyone chants, “Giants! Wizards! Dwarves!” three times, and after the third time, each team gets into their agreed-upon character. Very dramatic, actually. They’ll talk you into playing best of three, best of five, best of six.

Kitty Wanna Corner

(Warmup, Physical, Concentration, Group-Building)

- Standing circle, one person in the middle (the “kitty”).
- The person in the middle walks around the circle, saying to each person “Kitty wanna corner?”, to which those on the circle respond, “ask your neighbor.” Meanwhile, other people on the circle can quickly switch places, although they must plan the switch secretly (eye contact, nodding, for instance), because they don’t want the “kitty” to take their place and end up in the middle. A reliably energizing game.

Hide and Name

(Warmup, Physical, Group-Building)

- Someone stands in the center of the room and closes his/her eyes and counts to 3. The rest of the group tries to “hide” (not too easy in most of our spaces).
- When the person in the center opens their eyes they have to name everyone they can see, without moving. Even if they know someone is behind them, if they can’t name them it doesn’t count.

Orchestra

(Warmup, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Building a soundscape w/ voices/bodies that has to have a specific sound.

Slow

(Warmup, Physical, Concentration)

- Have a race where each participant tries to finish last but must continuously move forward.

Race

Numbers Game

(Warmup, Concentration, Group-Building)

- Everyone closes their eyes and, as a group, tries to count to ten, or (if they’re good) twenty. If two people speak at the same time, the group must start over at one.

Sculptures

(Warmup, Concentration, Group-Building, Character Creation)

- Pair off, sculptors and sculptees. Without talking, the sculptor must move the body parts of the sculptees to represent a character, emotion, abstract idea, etc.
- Have the sculptors walk around and look at each other's sculptures. Then switch roles with your partner, or make the characters come alive into a scene.

Mirrors

(Warmup, Concentration, Group-Building)

- Pair off. One person makes subtle, then not-so-subtle, motions, and their partner must reflect those motions.
- After a while, switch the leader of the motion. For advanced groups, try doing a "reflection" where neither partner leads.

Line Repetitions

(Warmup, Vocal, Improv)

- Start in circle. Everyone takes a turn repeating the same line in a different way. Go for two rounds. Can add new lines for more rounds.
- Addition: Can also break into small groups, each group creating a scene that contains the line.

Dark Crystal

(Warmup, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Participants spread out to the far reaches of the room and begin to hum softly.
- Slowly, everyone moves toward the center of the room. The hum intensifies (raised volume and pitch) as people get closer.
- When everyone is gathered in the center, they crouch down and then jump up with an explosive yell!

Donkey

(Warmup, Physical, Group-Building)

- Circle up with one person in the middle. The person in the middle points to anyone on the circle and says a word ("Bunny," "elephant," "donkey," or "Supremes") and the pointed-at person—as well as the two people on either side of them—must make a certain motion.
- Here's where you need to know your animals: "Bunny" (person pointed at must wiggle their butt—their cotton tail—while the two people on either side must give the pointed-at person bunny ears—you know, like the peace sign); "Elephant" (person pointed at must hang an arm in front of their face; the two on the side must create "C's" with their arms as if giving the middle person ears); "Donkey" (all three stand completely still); "Supremes" (all three must stick their left arm straight out and sing "Stop! In the name of love..."). You are encouraged, of course, to add in more variations here.
- After pointing at someone on the circle, the person in the middle immediately counts to ten, quickly. If any of the three people on the circle do the wrong motion, move or speak on "donkey!", or fail to do the correct motion by the count of ten, they must then enter the circle. This is an incredibly silly but exciting and addictive game.

Zip Zap Zop

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Everyone in a circle. One person starts by "throwing" a ball of energy to someone else in the circle. The sound with the throw is first "zip" then the next person throws the ball and says "zap" to the third person who throws the ball while saying "zop." And then the fourth person starts all over again with zip. Point of exercise: to get people in tune with each other, listening, watching, getting energy up, etc.

This is not a pencil, it's a...

(Warmup, Improv)

- Pass around a pencil in a circle. Every time someone gets it they have to say “this is not a pencil it is a (for example) toothbrush” (and imitate the toothbrush motion), the next person takes the pencil and says "this is not a toothbrush its a finger nail polisher" the next person takes the pencil and says "this is not a finger nail polisher its a motorized nose hair cutter" etc etc. the game must be done quickly no time to really think.

Peruvian Ball Game

(Warmup, Physical, Group-Building)

- Good for working on accurate movements. Everyone chooses an imaginary ball to be playing with (basketball, ping pong ball, whatever) and begins to "play" with that ball while moving around the room.
- When the facilitator yells "Stop" everyone stops moving but continues to play with their ball, while also observing the motion of the person next to them. When the facilitator yells "Switch" everyone starts to perform the exact motions of the person they were observing, as accurately as possible. The facilitator allows for two or three more stops and switches and then instructs everyone to continue to play with the ball they have while also looking for their original ball. Once they've found it, the person who was playing with it stands on the side, still looking for their ball. This continues until everyone has found their ball.

What?

(Warmup, Vocal, Concentration, Improv)

- Two people in the scene, the first person says something like, Mom I need to tell you I'm pregnant—the second actor says what? and the person repeats what they said, second actor asks what again, person repeats what they said, second actor asks a third time, person repeats what they said, then second actor may reply unless the first actor keeps talking which at that point the second actor just keeps asking “what?” It's a great game because it makes you really think about what you're saying and it can really raise the stakes in the scenes--also the different implications you're giving each time you repeat the word what and what you said...

Flip the Script

(Warmup, Physical, Group-Building)

- Need a tarp or large material. The people in the workshop should just barely fit on the material standing up.
- Everyone stand on the tarp. You folks have to figure out a way to flip the tarp over without anyone touching the floor outside the tarp.

Rhythm Circle

(Warmup, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Start everyone off standing in a circle. One person adds a beat with hand or foot.
- Go around the circle, each person adding a beat.

I am a Magician!

(Warmup, Vocal, Physical, Improv, Icebreaker)

- One person stands on a chair declaring “I am a Magician! And you are all SKIERS!” for example; or tigers or police officers or oak trees or anything he/she wants. The rest of the group then begins to act like the thing they’ve been assigned.

- Takes time to develop, but a great game to get creative with. The 2004 Ryan workshop featured the command that we become good, altruistic pirates.

Bears and Woodcutters

(Warmup, Concentration, Group-Building)

- Works especially well with youth. One person is the “bear.” He/she stands facing a wall while rest of the group acts like lumberjacks.
- When the bear roars and turns around to face the group, all the woodcutters must drop to the group and lay motionless and soundless. The bear must do whatever he/she can (scream loud, act crazy, tell jokes) to get the woodcutters to make a sound or motion but cannot touch woodcutters!
- If a woodcutter makes a sound/motion, they become another bear. Last woodcutter laying still is the winner.

Who Started the Motion?” (AKA Master of Puppets)

(Warmup, Concentration, Group-Building)

- One person walks into a corner or another room (anywhere out of earshot of the rest of the group). The remaining group members then choose who will be the “director.”
- The remaining group members circle up and the director starts a motion that everyone else must imitate. The group then calls the removed member back into the room, who then stands in the center of the circle.
- The group changes its motion only when the director does. They must change subtly and swiftly, because the person in the middle is trying to guess who the director is. They have unlimited guesses, and in the next round the director from the prior round becomes the guesser.

Apples, Oranges, Bananas

(Warmup, Physical, Improv, Storytelling, Group-Building)

- Create a circle of chairs, one fewer than the number of people.
- Assign one of the three fruits to each group member as if you’re numbering off by 3’s (so there are roughly the same number of each). Everyone must remember his or her fruit.
- The person in the middle tells an improvised story. If that person says the word, say, “orange,” in their story, all the “oranges” must get up out of their chairs and find a new place to sit (the person in the middle will also be looking for a seat). The person left without a chair stays in the middle and provides the next story, etc.
- After a few rounds, allow the storytellers to say more than one fruit at a time, even all three.
- Stories about shopping in the produce department can get boring. You may want to change the theme.

Pass the Pen

(Warmup, Improv, Storytelling)

- Standing circle, with one person in the middle.
- The person in the middle closes their eyes as the people on the outside pass a pen around the circle, behind their backs. After a few seconds, the person in the middle says, “stop!”, and then says a word. Whoever is holding the pen at that point must tell or act out a one minute story about that word.

Stage Directions

(Warmup, Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Group-Building)

- Two actors on stage basically dictating each others actions, for example—“Amy walked over to the chair, sat down with a thump and said...”
- Then the other actor says something and on and on...

You Know What Your Problem Is?

(Warmup, Improv, Character/Scene Creation)

- Everyone stands in a line, with one person already in the center of the room. The first participant walks over to the middle of the room to create a scene prompted by the question, “you know what your problem is?”
- After 30 seconds or so, the next person in line says to the second person, “you know what your problem is?” (at this point the first person leaves the scene and walks offstage). Continue through the line, doing your best to keep the characters “problems” consistent with their previous actions.
- Bonus: after a round of this, go backward through the line and begin with the phrase, “you know what I like about you?”

Walk This Way

(Warmup, Physical, Group-Building, Improv, Character Creation)

- Have everyone start walking around the room, leading with a particular part of their body (head, hip, etc.). After everyone has chosen a walk, have everyone choose a noise that would go along with that walk (they continue walking), then lead them through a series of questions as they're walking: What is your name, Where are you from, What's your favorite food, etc. Everyone should just say their answers, not share them with the whole group.
- Once you have asked enough questions to feel they have built a character, have them stop and introduce themselves (in character) to the person next to them.
- This also works if you start with an emotion (think about the first emotion you had this morning and create and sound a motion to describe it, etc.) It requires a lot of facilitation, but some good characters generally come out of it- and usually ones that are totally different than what you might usually get.

Power

Lines

(Warmup, Improv, Character/Scene Creation)

- Works well as a fun closing activity. Divide the group into two equal lines that face one another.
- Choose a “power relationship.” For example, “boss/employee,” “mother/daughter,” “teacher/student” (sometimes more specific roles work better, depending on the group). One line is the “boss” (or whatever) and the other line is the “employee.”
- The first pair of actors facing one another improvise a scene. After one or two minutes (or after the scene has run its course), the facilitator snaps their fingers and the next pair un-freezes and improvises their own scene based on a different “boss/employee” conflict. Each pair goes once.

Physical Interpretation of Paintings

- All the participants but two are on stage. The remaining two sit in the audience. The facilitator props up a large painting behind them so that it's fully visible to the actors on stage.
- The actors then work to convey the shapes, colors, action, emotion, etc. in the painting to the audience members. They do this by silently moving their bodies or forming sculptures with other actors. (We may have also been able to make sounds, but not speech. I can't remember.)
- While the actors are performing, the audience members describe what they are learning about the painting. The facilitator prompts them to respond by asking questions if necessary.
- The facilitator signals for the actors to stop, allows more response from the audience and then has the audience members turn around to see the painting.
- Rotate members so that everyone gets a chance to be in the audience.

Freeze

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation)

- A PCAP mainstay and nice introduction to improvisation. Two people begin an improv scene. When someone else wants to jump in they call "freeze." The new person taps someone out, assumes their exact body position, but begins a new improve scene.
- Variation: After a few rounds, add a third character.
- Variation: Have people jump in as their character.
- Variation: "Monologue Freeze." Standard Freeze, except when the actors freeze they must give a 30-second monologue of the characters' unspoken thoughts.

Calling the Shots

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Character Depth)

- Two person scene where anyone from the audience can freeze the scene, come up and give a different situation--usually said with a large time difference, like "5 minutes later, Rob realizes his socks are in the toilet"...or audience can change the scene by giving the actors large objectives like, "all randy wants is attention," or "all sandy wants is to cry on someone's shoulder" (nothing really specific like, "all Andy wants is a slice of pizza," we're dealing with larger emotions in this game).

Evil Twin

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Character Depth)

- 4 players. 2 will play a scene. The other players are the other's evil twins. At any point, the 'twins' can shout 'freeze' after which they tag out their twin, and continue the scene and do something evil. After that, they move out again, and the original twin brother needs to justify the evil, correct or repair the damage done and continue the scene. Great setups for this game are things like first dates, or meeting your in-laws for the very first time.

God Bless The Killstudents

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Group-Building)

- The group starts out with a game of free association to get ideas going and then they have one person writing them all down on a chalk board—while playing a different game you try to incorporate those ideas into the game, like running jokes...then (We did this for our last class and it was AWESOME!) we put all the games we did up on the board along with the free association and we meld it ALL TOGETHER. So anyone can freeze a scene and change the rules.

Subtext

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Character Depth, Storytelling)

- You need 4 people, two doing the scene and two being the subtexters for what the scene people say--pretty self explanatory but it can get very complicated and confusing. the scene people have to listen to what they're actually "thinking" and make sure that's somehow in their actions.

Five Seconds

(Improv, Concentration, Character/Scene Creation, Character Depth)

- In a scene (either previously used or from scratch), each character must wait five seconds between each line spoken.

Your Stuff

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation)

- Bring in (manifest in!) assorted objects, preferably unrelated (hair bow, tea bag, etc.).
- Everyone writes a character sketch of the person who would have all these things in their room.
- Have the various characters interact in a particular scene.

Rotating Scene

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation)

- Start with 3-4 people on stage and the rest of the group seated in a semi-circle around them. Either improv a scene, assign characters/place/conflict, or use a scene from your play.
- After a period of time, signal to rotate the scene (people rotate in the order they are seated; those who rotate out sit on other end of semi-circle).
- As people rotate in, they join the scene already in progress. They can play new characters, take over the character of the actor who just left, or play their character from the play.
- Activity ends when everyone has rotated in or when the scenes drag.

Character Interviews

(Improv, Storytelling, Character Depth)

- Once a workshop participant has roughly established a character in a scene, the rest of the group can “interview” that character by asking questions (start off shallow, then deeper): What’s your name? How old are you? Do you have any brothers or sisters? Do you get along with them? Can you tell me about a time you got in trouble when you were in elementary school?
- Shorter variation: stop a scene and ask each character what they are thinking/feeling (encourage the actors to say something the audience wouldn’t otherwise know).

Finding humanity within the ‘bad’ characters...

(Character Depth, Storytelling)

- Helpful for group-closeness and character-building.
- Each actor tells the group what they have in common with their character (one specific trait, story, etc.)—use this to help build humanity and history within the character.
- This CAN backfire, as some don’t want to share, but it always prompts discussion.

Talk Show

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Character Depth)

- On paper, make a list of characteristics about an invented character (age, gender, race, rich/poor, where they live, what they like to eat, etc.).
- Take 5-10 minutes to write a memoir of that character, which must include mention of at least one other person in it. Take volunteers to read about their character.
- Have an “on-stage” confrontation between those two characters, with the writer of the memoir playing the talk show host, à la Jerry Springer, Jenny Jones, etc.

Change it Up

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation)

- Split up into groups of 3-4 people. Each group comes up with characters (clown, monster, teacher...) and a scenario (car breaks down...) But the groups give the characters and scenario to another group to do. Group A comes up with Scenario 1 which group B acts out.

Conflict Game

(Improve, Scene development)

- Split into partners
- Each partnership decides on a conflict to argue (each person takes an opposing stance in the argument). The disagreement can be as simple as cats vs dogs or even numbers vs odd numbers
- Have each partnership argue for one minute. In that minute no one can change their position or come to an agreement

- Listen for conflicts that reference a third party or person, then bring that third character into the situation to build on the conflict and scene.

“Shoulda Said”

(Improve, Scene development, group building)

- Two volunteers enter the middle of the circle
- One person in the circle shouts out a scenario (example, blind date)
- The two volunteers begin to role play the scene (acting out a blind date)
- Anytime any member of the circle thinks the actors should have said something more interesting, they shout out “shoulda said” and the actor must say a new sentence in its place
- This scene can help take scenarios from safe, boring, and ordinary to crazy, interesting, and pushing the limits.

Death or Vomit

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Character Depth)

- For advanced theater troupes and creative/insane facilitators only. This exercise prevents plays from repeating over-familiar themes/scenes.
- Before your workshop compile a list of places/events/settings, particularly very specific ones that your workshop members’ characters don’t usually end up. For example: Taste-testing a new hamburger for McDonald's; trapped in the gorilla's cage at the zoo; on a space shuttle launched into orbit; behind the Cubs fan who ruined the game; in an adult bookstore; traveling vacuum cleaner salesman; trick-or-treaters; asking an adult to buy beer; accidentally setting something on fire; delivering a eulogy for someone they don't know; stranded on a desert island; being served in a middle school cafeteria; etc., etc., add in your own. Yeah, some of those are cliché, but they get the actors out of the usual streetcorner talk: 'hey what's up' 'you know, just chillin.....’
- Next, compile a list of odd questions. For example: Why are you so boring?; Why do you have Barbie Dolls in your sock drawer?; Did you watch "Taxi" last night?; Why can't I trust you?; Why don't you ever say "Thank You"?; Why do you keep onions in your glove compartment?; Why don't you go apologize to your mom?; etc., etc.).
- Invite 3-4 participants to begin a scene (at this point they don’t know what it’s about). They can play their usual characters or they can invent a new one, but they must keep the same character through the whole game.
- After entering, the facilitator/listmaster randomly assigns one of the settings (where the actors will be) and one of the questions (the scene starts with this question being asked by one of the characters. After approx. 2-3 min., the scene ends when one of the characters dies or vomits.

Picture Frame/Portrait

(Concentration, Improv, Character/Scene Creation)

- People are divided into groups of 4 or 5. You ask them to sculpt a family portrait. They can use any definition of family, not just the standard one.
- Each group then presents their picture, and the audience tries to guess what kind of family it is. In addition, you can pick a couple of pictures to act out. This is a great brainstorming technique for scene development.

Silent Conversation

(Improv, Concentration, Character/Scene Creation)

- Everyone finds a space to sit quietly. For the next five or ten minutes, they imagine that they are having a conversation (whispering out loud is optional) with someone that they “really need to talk to.”
- At the end of the exercise, those who are willing can share their stories with the rest of the group.

- At this point, an option would be for the group member to either play him/herself or their conversation partner in a scene with other, carefully chosen, group members.

Is it Safe???

(Group-Building, Discussion, Character Creation, Character Depth)

- Choose a 'safe' word, a word that workshop members use to take refuge in the vague, and spotlight it. For instance, it's shallow criticism to say someone else's work is 'cool', 'deep,' or perhaps (as happened at my workshop), 'soft' (the example given at the meeting was 'tough'). \
- So what does that mean? We could then ask each workshop member to make a list to questions we ask: "what does a 'soft' person look like? What do they do with their hands? Their eyes? What do they regret? What are some things a 'soft' person isn't? What would a 'soft' person think of this workshop? This exercise?"

Closing Activity

(Group-Building)

- Go around a circle and each person says one word about the day's workshop.

Count to Twenty

(Group Building)

- Everyone stands in a circle and closes their eyes
- As a group, we try to count to twenty without any two people saying the same number
- There is no order, and eyes must stay closed
- Any time two or more people say the same number, the group must start over at one.
- This is a great exercise for focusing energy and fostering a collective group feeling of working together and being on the same team.

POETRY

Where I Live

Write a poem with the name of a street you know well as the title. Before beginning to write, free-write two lists - one of things you're likely to find on that street, another of things you would probably never find on that street. Then, during the writing of the poem, make sure to include at least five items from each list in your poem. This is a good exercise because people have nostalgia for places and the lists demand really specific detail. Since it doesn't have to be a street you lived on, there is a nice variety of what people choose. Also, when making the lists, I don't specify concrete or abstract things, so people could just as easily say that grief/anger/joy lived on their street as the old elm/the fire department/the crazy man with the green hat, which can be interesting. Usually people really share something of themselves in this poem and it encourages a lot of identifying and question-asking.

N-less

Write a poem without using the letter 'n.' The variation of "arbitrary limitation" games is endless. The point, of course, is to make the writers challenge themselves to use words that they would not otherwise use.

Forming Poems

Take a famous poem, and type it with no line breaks, and make copies. Have the group re-write the poem with breaks as they see fit, and talk about why

Pictures and Words

Bring in postcards, photos, or other images. Each person picks one and writes a poem being as descriptive as possible, using all their senses (others should be able to recognize the picture described).

All Work and No Play...

Write a poem using one (interesting) word or phrase TEN TIMES within it.

Taboo

Write a poem about a subject that you never name within the poem. If you've described it well, others should be able to guess.

Weekly World News

Bring in headlines from the aforementioned publication—each headline can be the title or first line of a poem. Everyone gets one. Be sure to find something serious in even the craziest of headlines. The implications are scary, compelling.

Interesting Word

Have each person throw out an interesting word. Everyone then writes a poem using ALL the words generated.

Exotic Animal

Imagine you are looking at an exotic zoo creature. Have everyone write down questions (not 'yes or no') of things they'd like to know about it. (Ideally the questions are all visible to everyone such as what does it eat? What does it do for fun on a rainy day?). Everyone picks an abstract word (anger, peace, loneliness, etc.) and answers some of the questions in terms of their word, in the form of a poem—an abstraction is brought to life!

Praise

Write a poem praising something that you ordinarily wouldn't praise or that most people would not think is worthy of praise.

POETRY AND PROSE

Forget it

Imagine there's a place where all the things you try to forget go. What does it look like? This is designed specifically to get people to write about things that are potentially hard for them to talk about, and do so imaginatively and with vivid detail.

Ordinary Process

Have everyone write about something that everyone has done, (such as peeling an orange) while attempting to convey a secret emotion. Afterward, see if people can guess the emotions.

Exquisite Corpse

Form a circle. Have each person write a sentence in which the last three words fall on the last line, then fold the paper over everything but the last line. Then pass it on to the next person, and continue repeating this process. Then read the results.

Story Circle

Talk, ruminate, and ask each other questions on a certain theme before writing/acting/drawing. For example: shame. Have folks talk about times when they've felt ashamed—ask each other questions to get more detail. Ideally the detail will transfer to your chosen art form.

I Spy

Everyone describes, in particular, written detail, an inanimate object in the room, without using its name. Others guess what it is.

I Know

Make a list, for ten minutes of things you know. Be specific: i.e., I know how to tie my shoe, I know how my mother laughs, etc. Expand on these lists in the form of a poem or a short story.

Writing Characters, And Then Some

Bring in (manifest in!) assorted objects, preferably unrelated (hair bow, tea bag, concert tickets, etc.). Everyone writes a character sketch of the person who would have all these things in their room in either poem or prose form. Deepen the character by continuing to write, with a new objective in mind (i.e., this character meets you, the writer; this character at age 75, etc.).

Pledge

Write your own version of the Pledge of Allegiance. What or whom do you give your allegiance to?

Telepictionary

Kind of like Exquisite Corpse, but with pictures! Each person starts with a blank piece of paper and writes a sentence on it. The sentences should be as evocative as possible – at least 3 adjectives, 3 nouns, and, of course, verbs. Then, they hand the piece of paper to the next person, who draws a picture of the sentence and folds over the sentence. The next person writes a sentence that describes the picture, then

folds over the picture. Keep passing the paper around; pass it an odd number of times so that the exercise ends with a sentence. Then, share. Hilarity ensues.

Conflict

Manifest in photographs you've clipped from magazines and newspaper stories and ads. Invent a conflict occurring in the picture (this is especially interesting if the picture looks, initially, happy/devoid of conflict) and write a short story or poem describing it.

Directions

List the directions and commands that play over and over in your head. They can come from many sources: parents, society, yourself, friends, etc.

Freewrite

Write for 10 minutes about anything that comes to mind. Don't lift up your pencil. Try to get down as many ideas as possible, and to follow the most interesting ones. Be meaningful. Surprise yourself.

Open letter

Write an open letter to a person or entity that is unlikely to respond

Questions

Make a list of at least 30 questions – real questions – that you have. Pick one of your questions. Answer it. Then, answer it differently.

Names

Tell the story of your name. What does it mean? How did you get it? Do you like it? What name would you give yourself if you could choose?

Symbol

Describe an object that is a symbol for you. How does the object symbolize you? Or write about a time when you realized that someone important to you, someone you knew well, was not the person you thought they were. What specific action led to that realization?

PROSE

Abstract

Rewrite a long story you've already written, but in 15 lines max.

Tone

Write a character sketch describing, in detail, a person that frightens you or that you have a strong, strong negative reaction to. Don't tell us how you feel about the person; show us through your tone. Then, write from the point-of-view of that person – show us his hopes and dreams, and show us how he feels about you.

Three short stories

A fun way to change up any prompt. Instead of writing a straightforward response, have the writer describe her response using three short stories. (Example: "What would you like to change? Show us using three short stories." "What does the night look like? Show us using three short stories.")

I Want A House

People write about what their ideal house would be, try to encourage them to use metaphor.

Look Closely

Take a painting, picture, or object, observe it very closely and write about it. It is a good exercise to practice imagery from the five senses.

Simon Says

Have them write anything they want. Every other minute, add a new twist to the assignment. For example, 3 minutes into writing, have them add a metaphor. 5 minutes into writing, have them make the next two lines rhyme. 7 minutes into writing, have them include the word heavy, etc.

WRITING PROMPTS

Begin a poem, story, or freewrite with:

- “I am” / “I am from”
- “It’s hard for me to admit that...”
- “I am made of”
- “I am happiest when”
- “When I was 13...”
- “I most remind myself of my [mom/dad/etc.] when...”
- “When I first came to [place], I thought...”
- “It scares me when...”
- “You wouldn’t recognize me if...”
- -I want you to know that...”

More writing prompts:

- What type of person scares you? (Or, whom do you scare?)
- Narrate your thoughts on the day you learn the world will end at midnight.
- A poem called “My Poem Doesn’t Know How To.”
- Write your life story in a 15-line poem
- Have everyone think of a rule—their own rule.
- Find adjectives about yourself using each letter in your name.
- Look at pictures with the captions removed and describe them/write new captions.
- Write about emotions from the perspective of someone of the opposite sex.
- Write about the first house you lived in (i.e., the floor plan, etc.)
- Collaborative story (pass around)
- Stepping stones in your life
- Write about a significant meal
- Write from the perspective of the opposite gender
- Give someone eight words, let them make a poem
- Free write by starting w/ a particular word
- Write a letter to someone who can’t or won’t respond
- Describe yourself as an object

- Write about a favorite place
- Write about love from the perspective of someone who's not you
- Describe another person FULLY
- Write from the perspective of an object
- Describe a place using all the senses
- Write a love letter to yourself
- Write about something you'd like to be in the company of over humans, and why.
- Write about a transportation experience
- Haiku
- "I remember" (or "believe," hate, wish, etc.)
- Write about a scar or mark on your body
- Where were you at age ____? In 19__?
- Give an assignment to the person on your right
- Conversation/dialogue between two people in the workshop
- Write about a dream
- Describe the most memorable meal you have ever had.
- What do your thoughts taste like?
- Write about something that you want to preserve or hang onto.

Once you have gotten to know the people in your workshop, give them each a personalized assignment that challenges them (for instance, make the person who always writes rhyming poems write a poem without any rhymes).

VISUAL ART AND WRITING

Happy Happy Joy Joy

Write about a happy time in your life (or a sad time, a painful time, etc.) for ten minutes. Then draw it. Results always very wildly.

Self-Symbol

Draw a “self-symbol” and write about it.

Variation: Write about someone else’s, and what it says about you.

Scavenger Hunt

Give a list of things to “find” (a texture, a memory, what you hear with your eyes closed, etc.). Then make art or a poem from the list.

Abstract Reality

Make a list of verbs, emotions, etc. Works best with a list of “feelings.” Then have everyone draw one of the words abstractly, and to add complexity, the drawing could be in a single color that also represents that word to the participant. No recognizable images are allowed.

House

Draw a map (floorplan, picture of the exterior) of the first house/apartment/dwelling that you remember living in. Then, write about your memories from that place. Have a conversation about what it means to be home, before beginning the exercise if necessary. If not quite ready to draw “home,” a collage can be used to start.

The Fast and the Furious

In combating 'coolness,' it was suggested that we hand everyone a stack of paper and, whether it is an art workshop or not, ask everyone to simply draw a series of pictures, with only one rule: you can't spend more than 30 seconds on one picture. Other 'arbitrary limitation' games: rewrite a long story you've already written, but in 15 lines max; write a poem without using the letter 'n.'

VISUAL ART

Offer a minimum of technique and theory - shading, mixing colors, lights and darks. With rare exceptions (someone unafraid to take artistic risks), do not teach perspective, composition, color theory, or other formal principles of art. Encourage the concept of art to expand, to things in everyday life, doodles, something that doesn't have to hang on a wall.

Squish

Take any size sheet of paper and any material (pen, colored pencil, etc.) and pair participants up with one sheet of paper. Ask participants to begin drawing on the opposite sides of the paper at the same time. Then yell “squish!” and ask the participants to turn the paper no more than 90 degrees. They continue drawing. Yell “squish!” every so often, turning the sheet, and watch as participants are forced to intermingle their drawings, teaching collaboration and the idea of letting go.

Timed Drawing

Start with an object, usually larger in size with enough detail to draw for 5-10 minutes, but that is simple enough that it won't be too overwhelming for new comers to drawing.

Have everyone draw the object for 10 minutes, with everyone drawing as much detail as they can for 10 minutes. Give them a heads up when time is half way done, and then again when they have one minute left.

Repeat the same thing for 5 minutes, 3 minutes, 1 minute, 30 seconds, and 10 seconds. The intervals are irrelevant and can easily change depending on how much time you have.

The goal is to end up being able to capture the object with as few lines as possible, really looking at what is essential to describing an object visually. Encourage students to draw big and use the whole page for each drawing. It is very typical for students new to drawing to rely on the safety of drawing small.

Sharing is not required for this exercise.

Utensil Drawing

Start off with an object (large with detail but not too intricate because achieving detail will be difficult with this exercise), distribute paper, one color of paint, and a utensil (we used a plastic knife but there might be restrictions, anything like that could be used though)

Then everyone paints the object using the utensil.

This is a great scaffolding to the timed drawing because it builds on the idea of depicting an object with few lines. The purpose of this exercise is to put everyone on a level playing field.

Water Color

You hand out a large piece of white paper (make sure its thick enough for watercolor)

Then you have participants randomly throw color on the page. Very abstractly. Nothing pictorial or representative, just colors on the page.

Then you fold the paper and either cut or rip it into smaller pieces (so each participant can have one piece. Each piece will have a random portion of the colors and then everyone draws on their page what they see in the colors (kind of like seeing things in the cloud formations).

This does not have to be a narrative where each piece builds on the last. They are individual pieces in and of themselves.

This exercise gets around the terrifying fear of the white page. For artists and non artists the white page is the most intimidating thing and very hard to overcome. This gets around that fear and starts participants off with a foundation (the watercolors) in order to build on and use for inspiration.

Goodbye Clichés

Talk about the meaning of visual clichés, list examples, and periodically place a moratorium on them (i.e., no eyeballs for three months, no birds shaped like V's for six months, absolutely no hearts with cracks in them).

Doodling Required

Here defined as drawing while the mind is focused elsewhere (talking on the phone, engrossed in T.V.) No thinking is permitted. Responsibility is given over to the pen, as if it were an independent agent. Use newsprint so there's no inhibition about wasting material and un-erasable ballpoint pen making judging and correcting impossible. Take 10-15 minutes with pen, crayon, etc.

Rorschach Art

With a black & white xerox of a cloudy sky, or a different natural image, find figures, faces, and strange scenarios. Draw directly onto xeroxes to bring the subject into focus. Or take a black & white xerox of snow covered pine trees (or another natural image with infinite tiny configurations). Cut a small window

out of another piece of paper and seek images within the xerox. Fix upon a picture that presents itself and enlarge that to a full drawing on good paper.

Starter Sheet

Glue a picture or a piece of a picture in the center of a larger page, then draw around it.

Collage Work

Bring in magazines and have participants select images they feel express who they are. To add complexity, you can ask that the images all be in a certain color that is representative of each person.
