



Improv Game Guide

Companion to “Say ‘Yes, And!’ to Change

Thank you for exploring the improv exercises from *Say “Yes, And!” To Change*.

If the book introduced the ideas, this guide is where you get to experience them.

Improvisers don’t learn by reading about improv. They learn by doing it. The same is true of the principles in the book. “Yes, And,” curiosity, emotional awareness, and digging deeper are not just concepts. They are habits. And habits develop through practice.

That is exactly what these exercises are designed to help you do.

Each game in this guide comes from the world of improvisational theater, where performers train themselves to respond quickly, build on ideas, and turn uncertainty into creativity. When adapted for teams and leaders, these same exercises help people experience the mindset behind the YES AND Framework in a memorable way.

You’ll find that each exercise includes:

- The purpose of the activity and how it connects to the book
- Simple instructions for running the exercise
- Tips to help it run smoothly
- Suggested debrief questions to connect the experience back to real work situations

You do not need any improv experience to run these activities. In fact, most people who participate have never done improv before. The exercises are intentionally simple and designed to work in workshops, team meetings, leadership programs, or book clubs.



A quick reassurance before you begin: these activities are not about being funny, clever, or performing. They are about noticing how people respond in the moment. Some of the best insights come from moments that feel awkward, unexpected, or a little silly.

That is part of the process.

So approach these exercises with curiosity, a willingness to experiment, and a healthy dose of playfulness. The goal is not perfection. The goal is awareness.

Because when people experience the “Yes, And” mindset in action, even for a few minutes, something interesting happens. Conversations open up. Creativity increases. And change starts to feel a little less intimidating.

In other words, the ideas from the book move from theory into practice.

So gather a group, give one of the exercises a try, and see what unfolds.

And remember the core rule of improv:

“Yes, And.”

“Yes, And” vs “Yes, But” (Chapter 5 - Yield to What is)

This exercise makes the core distinction *felt*, not just understood:

- “Yes, but” blocks, argues with reality, and shrinks options.
- “Yes, And” yields to what’s offered and builds forward.

It also reinforces the chapter’s main lesson: **you can’t build a useful future while you’re still fighting the present.**

Step 1: Set Up the Context

Say something like:

“We’re going to run a quick improv-based exercise that demonstrates how two small words can completely change collaboration. You don’t need to be funny. You just need to play along. The point is to notice the impact.”

Step 2: Create a Simple Scenario

Choose one low-stakes topic. Examples:

- Planning a team celebration
- Picking a restaurant
- Brainstorming ideas for improving a process
- Deciding where to go on vacation

Step 3: Round One - “Yes, But” Conversation

Pair people up. One person starts with an idea.

Rules:

- Every response **must begin** with: “Yes, but...”

- The goal is to respond naturally, like a real meeting.
- Keep the conversation moving quickly.

Example:

- A: “We should do a short training to help everyone with the new system.”
- B: “Yes, but people don’t have time for training.”
- A: “Yes, but we could make it optional.”
- B: “Yes, but then no one will show up.”

Let it run for 60–90 seconds.

Stop and reset.

Step 4: Quick Check-In

Ask:

- “How did that feel?”
- “What happened to the energy?”
- “Did you notice your brain narrowing or getting defensive?”

Don’t analyze deeply yet, just capture impressions.

Step 5: Round Two - “Yes, And” Conversation

Same partners. Same exact scenario. Start over with the exact same opening sentence (so you have the same starting point).

Rules:

- Every response **must begin** with: “**Yes, and...**”
- You are allowed to bring up constraints—but you must build forward.
- The goal is not to agree with everything; it’s to stay constructive.

Example:

- A: “We should do a short training to help everyone with the new system.”



- B: “Yes, and we could make it 15 minutes and super practical.”
- A: “Yes, and we could record it for people who can’t attend live.”
- B: “Yes, and we could collect the top 10 issues beforehand so it solves real problems.”

Run for 60–90 seconds.

Step 6: Debrief

Use a few of these questions (pick 3–5):

1. What differences did you notice in **energy** between the two rounds?
2. What happened to the number of **options** available?
3. In the “Yes, but” round, what did you find yourself focused on? (risk, limitation, threat, protecting time, etc.)
4. In the “Yes, And” round, did constraints disappear—or did you just relate to them differently?
5. Which round felt more like how meetings often go here?
6. Where do we accidentally use “Yes, but” as a way to **avoid yielding** to reality?
7. What’s one real workplace situation where we could replace a default “Yes, but” with:
“Yes, this is true... and here’s what we can do next.”

Countdown (Chapter 6 - Explore and Express Your Core)

Countdown is a fast, funny way to help people discover “core” by subtraction. As the time shrinks, the scene cannot survive unless the players identify what actually matters and let everything else go.

That maps directly to real life and work: when time, budget, and energy are limited (which is always), the question becomes: what is essential, and what is noise?

Step 1: Set-Up the Context

Say something like:

“We’re going to do a quick improv exercise called Countdown. You do not need to be funny. The point is to notice what happens when you have less time. You will discover what the scene truly needs, and that is the exact skill we are practicing in this chapter: identifying your core.”

Step 2: Choose a Strong Prompt (30 seconds)

Give the players a suggestion. Physical prompts work best because they create obvious action quickly. Use one of these formats:

Option A: A physical activity

- assembling a piece of furniture
- moving into a new apartment
- trying to teach someone a dance
- cooking under pressure in a kitchen

Option B: A location with movement

- at an airport gate as the flight is boarding
- in a crowded subway station

- in a hospital waiting room
- in a backstage area right before a show

Option C: A relationship + situation

- a coach and an athlete moments before a big game
- two coworkers trying to fix a problem before a client arrives
- siblings arguing while doing a task together

Tip: keep it simple. The exercise works because of compression, not complexity.

Step 3: Round One (60 seconds)

Set the timer for 60 seconds.

Instructions to the players:

- Start the scene immediately.
- Make clear choices quickly.
- Speak loudly enough for the group to hear.
- Do not stop early. Commit to the full minute.

When the timer hits, call “Stop.”

Step 3: Round Two (30 seconds)

Same players. Same prompt. Same scene, rebooted. Their goal is to get through the whole sixty second scene in half the time.

Set the timer for 30 seconds.

Instructions:

- You are doing “the same scene,” but faster.
- Do not worry about matching every line.
- Keep what feels essential and let the rest drop.

Call “Stop” at time.

Step 4: Round Three (15 seconds)

Same players. Same prompt.

Set the timer for 15 seconds.

Instructions:

- You will feel the urge to panic. That is normal.
- Your job is not to cram everything in.
- Your job is to communicate only what the scene truly needs to make sense.

Call “Stop.”

Step 5: Round Four (5 seconds)

Same players. Same prompt.

Set the timer for 5 seconds.

Instructions:

- This will be ridiculous. That is the point.
- In five seconds you only have room for the absolute core.
- Go for clarity first, then speed.

Call “Stop.”

Step 6: Debrief

This is where the learning locks in. Ask 3–6 of these questions:

1. What changed from 60 seconds to 15 seconds? What did you naturally cut first?
2. At what point did you feel panic, and what did you do with it? Did you speed up, simplify, or talk over each other?
3. In the 5-second version, what was left? What were the “core elements” of the scene (who you were, what you were doing, what mattered)?



4. Where do you see this in real work? When time gets tight, what do we tend to do: simplify to core, or try to cram everything in and create chaos?
5. If you had to run your workweek like this countdown, what would be the “60-second tasks” you enjoy, and what would be the “core 5 seconds” that actually matter most?
6. What is something you are doing that is basically “scene decoration,” not core? What would happen if you cut it?
7. What is one core strength you underuse at work that you would want to keep even when time gets compressed?

Two Word Story (Chapter 7 - Start Small, Take Small Steps)

Two-Word Story is a fast, funny way to practice Start Small in real time. Nobody can plan the whole plot because you only own two words. You are forced to stay present, take one small step, and build from whatever happens. It also creates a perfect, low-stakes lab for “act, analyze, adjust” because you can restart instantly and try again.

How to Play

Step 1: Set the Context

Tell the group:

“We are going to tell a story together, two words at a time. You only get two words, then your partner goes. Do not pause. Do not plan. Do not correct. Your job is to take the next small step.”

Then add the two rules that make the game work:

1. **Speed matters more than sense.**
If you go slow, people start writing novels in their head. We do not want novels. We want momentum.
2. **No fixing. No editing. No apologizing.**
If the story goes off the rails, good. That is the point. Keep going.

Step 2: Choose Two Simple Starting Words

Give them a starter phrase to begin. Any of these work:

- “Once upon”
- “Yesterday I”
- “In the”
- “My boss”



- “At lunch”
- “The dragon”

Step 3: Tell the Story

Partner A begins with two words. Partner B immediately adds two words. Keep alternating.

Example start:

A: “Once upon”

B: “a time”

A: “our team”

B: “panicked because”

A: “the printer”

B: “grew teeth”

A: “and demanded”

B: “a promotion”

It will get weird. Perfect.

Step 4: Run it Again, but Faster

Stop after about a minute and say:

“Same partners. New story. This time, twice as fast.”

This usually creates laughter and flow immediately because it shuts down overthinking.

Do not overcomplicate it. The game is already doing the teaching.

Common Problems and How to Fix Them

Problem: People pause to think.

Fix: Restart and say, “No pauses. If you pause, you are writing. We are not writing. We are playing.”



Problem: Someone uses more or fewer than two words.

Fix: Do not correct them in the moment. Keep going. The rule is a tool, not a law. If it happens repeatedly, remind everyone between rounds.

Problem: The story collapses into nonsense and people get self-conscious.

Fix: Celebrate it. Say, "Great. That means you are not controlling it. Start a new one and go faster."

Problem: Someone tries to steer the plot aggressively.

Fix: That is a teachable moment. In debrief, ask how it felt when one person tried to control the ending.

Step 5: Debrief

This is where you connect the laughs to real behavior.

Ask a few of these questions:

1. What did it feel like to only own two words at a time? Did that reduce pressure or increase it?
2. Where did you notice the urge to plan ahead? What happened to the story when you planned versus when you stayed present?
3. Did you have moments where your partner took the story somewhere you would not have chosen? How did you respond? Did you build, freeze, or fight it?
4. What is the workplace equivalent of trying to steer the story back to your idea? Where does that show up in how we handle change?
5. What helped you stay in motion? Speed, humor, letting go, trusting your partner, something else?
6. How does this connect to Start Small? What would it look like this week to only focus on "two words," meaning the next small step you can actually take?
7. How does this connect to AAA? What would "act" be? What would you analyze? What would you adjust?

Expert Interview (Chapter 8 - Access and Apply Your Inner Creative Genius)

Expert Interview is a fast way to experience creative flow on demand. It forces you to speak before you are “ready,” which is exactly how you bypass the inner critic and let your subconscious do what it is great at: making connections, generating options, and inventing meaning.

It also trains a core “Yes, And” skill: accepting the premise and building forward without self-editing.

Step 1: Set the Context

Pair people up. Decide who is Person A and Person B then say, “One person will play the world’s leading expert on a topic they know absolutely nothing about. Their job is to answer instantly and confidently. The other person is the interviewer. The interviewer’s job is to ask open-ended questions that keep the expert talking.”

Then choose a topic for the expert. Choose a topic that is common and not too technical. It should be something the “expert” does not know much about.

Great examples: fly fishing, furniture design, alpaca farming, competitive jump rope, the history of spoons, subterranean real estate, professional cupcake judging.

Avoid topics that could get sensitive or inappropriate. Keep it playful and low-stakes.

Rules that Make the Game Work

Rule 1: No pauses.

The expert answers immediately. If you pause to think, you fall back into the conscious “judge mind.”

Rule 2: Speak in full sentences.

Do not answer with one word. Give explanations, examples, stories, opinions. Make stuff up.

Rule 3: Confidence beats correctness.

The expert does not hedge. No “I’m not sure,” “maybe,” or “I don’t know.” You are the expert. Experts have opinions.

Rule 4: The interviewer helps, not traps.

This is not a gotcha interview. Your job is to draw out the expert’s genius, not expose them.

Rule 5: “Tell me more” is your best friend.

If the expert gives a short answer, the interviewer says, “Tell me more,” “Why is that true?” or “Can you give an example?”

Step 3: Play the Game

Round 1:

- Person A is the expert. Person B is the interviewer.
- The interviewer starts with a broad opener like:
 - “How did you get into this field?”
 - “What do most people misunderstand about this topic?”
 - “What separates amateurs from professionals?”
 - “What is the biggest mistake people make?”
- Keep the questions open-ended. Avoid yes/no questions.

Round 2:

- Switch roles. New topic.
- Same rules. Go fast.

Optional Challenge Round: 60 seconds

If the group is having fun, add pressure (in a good way):

- “This time, go 20% faster.”



- Or “This time, the interviewer keeps asking ‘why’ until the expert invents something hilariously specific.”

Helpful Question Bank for Interviewers

Use these if people get stuck:

- “What is the number one principle in your field?”
- “Walk me through your process from start to finish.”
- “What is a common myth about this topic?”
- “What do beginners do that drives you crazy?”
- “What are the tools of the trade?”
- “Tell me about your most famous success story.”
- “What is a controversial opinion you have about this field?”
- “If someone only did one thing to improve, what would it be?”
- “What is the future of this field?”

Common Problems and Fixes

Problem: The expert freezes.

Fix: Interviewer asks a simpler question: “What is the first thing a beginner should focus on?”

Also remind the expert: “Just open your mouth and start talking.”

Problem: The expert gets stuck giving short answers.

Fix: Interviewer uses “Tell me more,” then “Give me an example,” then “Why does that matter?”

Problem: The expert starts hedging or apologizing.

Fix: Interviewer says, “As the world’s leading expert, what do you believe?” and keeps them moving.

Problem: People try to be funny on purpose.

Fix: Remind them: the goal is flow, not jokes. The funny shows up naturally when you stop filtering.



Step 4 Debrief:

Ask a few of these:

1. When did you feel most “in flow”? What changed in your body or mind when you stopped editing?
2. What happened the moment you tried to think of something clever? Did it help or did it slow you down?
3. Did you surprise yourself with anything you said? What does that suggest about how many ideas you actually have inside you?
4. Where at work do you wait to be ready before speaking or sharing an idea? What would change if you practiced “answer instantly” energy in those moments?
5. How is this connected to “calm the pond” vs “go fast”? Which one did this exercise use, and why did it work?
6. For leaders: what does this teach us about brainstorming culture? What would happen if we built meetings where people were rewarded for momentum and exploration, not polish?

It's Tuesday (Chapter 9 - Notice and Nurture Emotion)

"It's Tuesday" is designed to show (in a fun, unforgettable way) that **emotion drives content**.

You will feel it in real time: as soon as someone commits to an emotion, their brain automatically invents a story to justify it. That is exactly what happens at work, too. The difference is that at work, we usually don't notice the emotion first, and then we're surprised by the fallout.

Step 1: Set the Context

Say something like: "We're going to run a quick improv exercise that demonstrates a simple idea from this chapter: emotion drives content. The words we say are often shaped by how we feel in the moment.

In this exercise, you'll see how the exact same sentence can lead to completely different ideas depending on the emotion behind it. You don't need to be funny or clever. Just commit to the emotion and let your brain fill in the rest. The goal is to notice how quickly your mind creates meaning once a feeling shows up."

Step 2: Prepare the Game

1. Put people in pairs. Choose who is **Person A** and **Person B**.
2. Explain the roles:
 - **Feeder:** says a neutral line, with no emotion.
 - **Responder:** reacts with a big emotion first, then explains why.
3. Pick a neutral line (use one of these):
 - "It's Tuesday."
 - "Here's a cup of coffee."
 - "We need to talk."



- “I sent the email.”
- “The meeting is at 2:00.”
Start with “It’s Tuesday,” because it’s wonderfully bland.

The Rules that Make the Exercise Work

Rule 1: Emotion first. Explanation second.

Do not think of your justification ahead of time. Commit to the emotion, then let your brain scramble to make sense of it.

Rule 2: Go bigger than feels comfortable.

A small, polite emotion makes the exercise flat. Big emotion makes it click.

Rule 3: Repeat the line before you justify it.

This forces commitment and stops people from rushing to “be clever.”

Rule 4: No judging, no fixing.

This is not performance art. It’s a demonstration. The “bad” answers are often the best ones.

Step 3: Play the Game

Round 1: Simple version

1. **Feeder (A)** says the neutral line with no emotion:
“It’s Tuesday.”
2. **Responder (B)** repeats the exact same line with a big emotion.
For example, terrified:
“It’s Tuesday?!”
3. **Responder (B)** repeats it again, even bigger.
“It’s TUESDAY!”
4. Then **Responder (B)** immediately justifies the emotion with the first explanation that pops up:
“Oh no. Tuesday is the day of my execution. I’ve been dreading it for months.”



5. Switch roles and repeat with the same line.

Round 2: Add variety

Now do it again, but the feeder uses a different neutral line (“Here’s a cup of coffee,” etc.), or keep “It’s Tuesday” and just change the emotion.

Round 3: Speed round (optional, but fun)

Tell pairs: “Now go twice as fast. Don’t make it good. Make it immediate.”
Do 3 quick reps per person.

Emotion Options (useful if people freeze)

If you want to make it easier, give responders a short menu to choose from. Here’s a solid list:

- Joy / excitement
- Fear / panic
- Anger / irritation
- Disgust
- Relief
- Pride
- Shame / embarrassment
- Suspicion
- Sadness
- Overwhelmed
- Awe (weirdly fun)

Tip: if someone is stuck, tell them to pick one randomly and commit.

Common Sticking Points and Fixes

Sticking point: People explain before they emote.

Fix: Stop them and reset: “Give me the emotion first. Say the line twice with the feeling. Then justify.”



Sticking point: The emotion is too small.

Fix: “Great. Now do it at a 9 out of 10.”

Sticking point: People try to be funny.

Fix: “Don’t chase funny. Chase commitment. Funny will chase you.”

Sticking point: Someone says, ‘I don’t know.’

Fix: “Perfect. Make that your justification. ‘It’s Tuesday... and I have no idea why, but my body is freaking out.’ Keep going.”

Step 4: Debrief

Bring everyone back together and ask a few of these:

1. What surprised you about how quickly your brain invented a story once the emotion showed up?
2. Did you notice how the exact same line became a completely different “message” depending on the emotion behind it?
3. Where does this show up at work for you: emails, Slack messages, feedback conversations, meetings, change rollouts?
4. When you’re frustrated, anxious, or defensive, what kind of “content” do you tend to generate (tone, assumptions, word choices, interpretations)?
5. What would change if, before responding, you paused for five seconds and asked, “What am I feeling right now?”



Advance and Expand (Chapter 10 - Dig Deeper)

This exercise gives people a felt experience of the difference between “moving fast” and “going deep.” It also makes one point painfully obvious: most of us default to advancing, even when depth would help us more.

Step 1: Set the Context

Say something like, “We’re going to run a quick improv exercise that demonstrates an idea from this chapter: the difference between advancing an idea and expanding it. Most of us instinctively jump to the next idea, solution, or action. That feels productive, but it often means we move past something before we really understand it.

In this exercise, you’ll feel the difference between rushing ahead and staying with an idea long enough to explore it. You don’t need to be funny or clever. Just follow the instructions and notice what happens when you slow down and dig a little deeper.”

Step 2: Prepare the Game

1. Put people into pairs. Decide who is **Player A** and **Player B**.
2. Explain the two modes:

Advance means: accept the offer and immediately push to a new idea, next action, or next “solution.”

It creates speed and motion, but it often stays thin.

Expand means: accept the offer and deepen what’s already there. Add detail. Ask a question. Heighten stakes. Explore the moment.

It creates depth, clarity, and often better ideas.

3. Choose a simple starting offer. Use work-flavored prompts like:
 - “We need to fix this printer.”
 - “We have to plan the event.”
 - “The client is unhappy.”
 - “We’re behind schedule.”

- “Leadership wants a new process.”

Keep it ordinary. The “magic” comes from how you handle it, not the prompt.

Step 3: Play the Game

Round 1: Advance Only (3–4 minutes)

Goal: Feel what happens when you move fast but stay shallow.

1. Player A says the opening offer:
“We need to fix this printer.”
2. Player B must start with “Yes, and…” (or just accept it) and then **advance immediately** to a new idea or action. For example:
“Yes, and let’s just buy a new one and move on.”
3. Player A accepts that and immediately advances again.
“Yes, and while we’re at it, let’s outsource all IT.”
4. Keep going for 45–60 seconds. Rapid-fire.

Rules for Round 1

- No lingering. No questions. No exploring.
- Every response must jump to the next thing.

Stop after a minute. Most pairs will feel it: quick, kind of frantic, and oddly unsatisfying.

Round 2: Expand First (4–6 minutes)

Goal: Feel how much richer things get when you stay with the original offer longer.

Reset. Use the **exact same opening line**.

1. Player A: “We need to fix this printer.”



2. Player B must expand before advancing. Options:
 - Add detail: “Yes, and it’s been jamming every time we print invoices.”
 - Ask a curious question: “Yes, and when did it start happening?”
 - Name the stakes: “Yes, and if it’s down today, payroll is going to be a disaster.”
 - Heighten the moment: “Yes, and the printer is making a sound that feels... ominous.”
3. Player A keeps expanding too. Stay with the printer problem. Explore. Make it real. Make it specific. Make it human.

After 60–90 seconds of expanding, either player can advance, but only after the scene has depth.

Rules for Round 2

- You must expand for at least 4–6 exchanges before advancing.
- Questions are allowed (and encouraged).
- Specificity is gold. “This printer” becomes “the printer that only jams when Lisa is watching.”

Stop and notice: most groups will report Round 2 feels calmer, clearer, and more creative.

Round 3: Switch on Command (Optional, 4–6 minutes)

This round makes the lesson stick, because it forces people to shift modes on purpose.

1. Add a third person to each pair (or combine pairs into groups of three). This person is the **Director**.
2. The Director’s only job is to call out, at random:
 - “ADVANCE!”
 - “EXPAND!”
3. Players must instantly adjust their next line to match the mode. Keep the same scene.

Rules for Round 3

- When the Director says “EXPAND,” you deepen what’s already there. No leaps.
- When the Director says “ADVANCE,” you push to the next idea/action.
- Keep it moving. Don’t debate the call.

This round reveals everyone’s default pattern. Most people advance under pressure without realizing it, which is exactly the point.

Step 4: Debrief

Use a few of these questions:

1. Which round felt easier for you, and why?
2. Which round created more clarity, better ideas, or more connection?
3. Where do you “advance” too quickly in real life?
 - Feedback conversations
 - Brainstorms
 - Change rollouts
 - Conflict
 - When someone brings you a concern
4. What is one situation at work where “expanding” for two extra minutes would save hours later?
5. What would it look like to “Yes, And” by asking one more question before solving?