

DRAMA WARM-UP GAMES

12 Practical Warm-Ups for Drama Classes, Rehearsals & Workshops

Using These Warm-Ups

Drama warm-up games can help middle school students shift their attention away from everything that happened before class and begin focusing on performing, listening, moving, creating, and working with one another.

A useful warm-up does not need to be complicated. Many of the activities in this resource require no props, costumes, scripts, or special equipment and can be completed in five or ten minutes. Choose an activity based on what your particular group needs that day.

Quick Reference Guide

Warm-Up	Primary Focus	Time
Name & Motion	Confidence	5–10 minutes
Pass the Expression	Facial expression	5–10 minutes
Count to 20	Concentration	5–10 minutes
What Are You Doing?	Improvisation	10–15 minutes
Emotion Walk	Physical acting	5–10 minutes
Zip, Zap, Zop	Concentration	5–10 minutes
Mirror Partners	Observation	5–10 minutes
One-Word Story	Listening	5–10 minutes
Character Walks	Characterization	5–10 minutes
Sound & Movement Circle	Confidence	5–10 minutes
Yes, Let's!	Improvisation	5–10 minutes
Shake It Out & Wake It Up	Physical readiness	5–10 minutes

1. Name & Motion

Have students stand in a circle. One at a time, each student says their name while performing a simple movement or gesture. It might be a wave, a dramatic bow, a spin, an exaggerated pose, or almost any other classroom-appropriate movement. Afterward, the entire group repeats the student's name while copying the movement.

Continue around the circle until everyone has participated. For another round, see whether the group can remember each student's movement without being shown it first.

This is particularly useful with a new class because students get an opportunity to perform individually without being asked to act out a complicated scene or invent dialogue.

Skills Practiced	Confidence, movement, observation, memorization, group participation
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

2. Pass the Expression

Have students stand or sit in a circle. The first student turns toward the person beside them and makes a clear facial expression. The next student carefully observes the expression and attempts to reproduce it as accurately as possible.

That student then changes the expression into something new and passes the new expression to the next person. Continue until the expression has traveled around the entire circle.

Encourage students to make deliberate acting choices rather than simply trying to make one another laugh. Expressions can communicate happiness, disappointment, confusion, suspicion, fear, excitement, annoyance, embarrassment, or many other emotions.

For an additional challenge, ask students to communicate the expression without making any sound.

Skills Practiced	Facial expression, observation, emotional communication, concentration
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

3. Count to 20

Have the class stand or sit in a circle. Their goal is simple: count from 1 to 20 as a group.

The challenge is that there is no assigned speaking order. Anyone may say the next number whenever they think the moment is right. If two or more students say a number at the same time, the group must return to 1 and begin again.

Students should not establish a pattern beforehand, point to the person who should speak next, or simply count around the circle. The exercise works because everyone has to listen, remain aware of the group, and become comfortable allowing silence.

Reaching 20 can be surprisingly difficult—and surprisingly satisfying when the class finally succeeds.

Skills Practiced	Concentration, listening, patience, ensemble awareness
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

Teacher Tip: Resist the temptation to make the game easier by establishing a speaking order. The uncertainty is what encourages students to listen to the ensemble rather than simply wait for their turn.

4. What Are You Doing?

Have one student begin miming a recognizable activity, such as brushing their teeth, playing basketball, walking a dog, baking a cake, or digging a hole.

A second student approaches and asks, “What are you doing?” Instead of naming the activity they are actually performing, the first student names a completely different activity. For example, while pretending to brush their teeth, they might answer, “I’m climbing a mountain.”

The second student must immediately begin miming the activity that was named. Another student then approaches, asks the same question, and receives another completely different activity.

Encourage students to commit physically to whatever activity they are given instead of merely making one small gesture. The fun comes from having to quickly abandon what they expected and fully accept a new idea.

Skills Practiced	Improvisation, quick thinking, physical acting, imagination, commitment
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	10–15 minutes

5. Emotion Walk

Give students enough room to move safely around the classroom or performance space. Ask them to begin walking naturally without talking to one another.

Call out an emotion such as excited, nervous, angry, confused, suspicious, embarrassed, proud, exhausted, frightened, or disappointed. Without speaking, students should gradually allow that emotion to affect the way they walk.

Encourage them to think beyond facial expressions. How does nervousness affect someone's shoulders? Does confidence change someone's posture? Does disappointment make someone move more slowly? Where might an angry character carry tension?

Continue changing emotions every 20–30 seconds. You can also experiment with different intensities. Remind students that effective physical acting does not always mean making the biggest possible movement.

Skills Practiced	Physical acting, emotional expression, body awareness, characterization
What You Need	Open space
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

6. Zip, Zap, Zop

Have students stand in a circle. One student begins by making eye contact with another student, pointing or gesturing toward them, and clearly saying, “Zip.”

The receiving student immediately makes eye contact with someone else, gestures toward that person, and says, “Zap.” That student sends “Zop” to someone else. The sequence then returns to “Zip” and continues: Zip, Zap, Zop, Zip, Zap, Zop.

Start slowly enough that students understand the pattern. As they become comfortable, encourage the group to increase the pace while maintaining clear eye contact and communication. The game is not simply about speed; clearly directing attention toward another performer makes it much easier for the group to succeed.

Skills Practiced	Concentration, eye contact, listening, reaction time, ensemble awareness
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

7. Mirror Partners

Divide students into pairs and have partners stand facing one another. Designate one person as the leader and the other as the mirror.

The leader begins making slow, deliberate movements while the mirror attempts to reproduce those movements as precisely as possible. Encourage students to use their entire bodies rather than only their hands and arms. After a minute or two, switch roles.

Once students become comfortable, try removing the designated leader. Both partners should move slowly while paying such close attention to each other that an observer might have difficulty determining who is leading.

The exercise works best when students aren't trying to trick or outrun their partners. The objective is cooperation and observation, not winning.

Skills Practiced	Observation, concentration, physical control, partner awareness, cooperation
What You Need	Enough space for pairs to move safely
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

8. One-Word Story

Have students sit or stand in a circle. Explain that the class will create one story together, but each student is allowed to contribute only one word at a time.

One student begins with a word such as “Yesterday.” The next student adds one word, followed by the next student, and so on around the circle.

Students will quickly discover that they cannot completely control where the story goes. They must listen to what has already been established and contribute something that helps the story continue. Encourage students to build upon one another's ideas instead of intentionally trying to derail the story with a random word.

Skills Practiced	Listening, storytelling, spontaneity, cooperation, accepting ideas
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

Teacher Tip: If students become too focused on planning their word before their turn arrives, remind them that the story may change completely before it reaches them. Their best choice depends on what the person immediately before them actually says.

9. Character Walks

Have students spread throughout the room and begin walking naturally. Then start giving them information about the imaginary character they are portraying.

Try prompts such as: “You are 90 years old.” “You are trying not to wake someone.” “You are the most important person in the building.” “You are carrying an imaginary backpack that is incredibly heavy.” “You have just entered a place where you don't think you belong.” “You are walking through extremely deep snow.”

Ask students to consider how each circumstance changes their posture, pace, gestures, focus, and use of space. As students gain experience, combine prompts. This exercise helps students discover that character can be communicated before an actor ever says a word.

Skills Practiced	Characterization, physical acting, imagination, body awareness
What You Need	Open space
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

10. Sound & Movement Circle

Have students stand in a circle. One student begins by creating a simple movement accompanied by a sound. For example, they might raise both arms while making a “whoosh” sound. The entire group immediately repeats the movement and sound together.

The next student creates a completely different sound-and-movement combination, which the group also repeats. Continue around the circle until everyone has contributed.

Encourage students to make choices that are clear enough for the group to imitate. Students do not need to be funny, clever, or impressive. The exercise is about making a choice, committing to it, and having the ensemble support that choice.

Skills Practiced	Confidence, vocal expression, movement, observation, ensemble support
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

11. Yes, Let's!

Have students spread out around the room. One student enthusiastically suggests an imaginary activity by saying something such as, “Let's climb a mountain!” Everyone responds, “Yes, let's!” and immediately begins physically pretending to climb a mountain.

After several seconds, another student makes a new suggestion. Again, everyone responds, “Yes, let's!” and commits to the new activity. Continue with different students suggesting activities.

The important part is the group's willingness to accept an idea. Whatever is suggested becomes the group's reality for those few moments. This introduces an important principle of improvisation and ensemble work: performers can accomplish much more when they support one another's ideas instead of immediately rejecting them.

Skills Practiced	Improvisation, acceptance, confidence, physical acting, ensemble cooperation
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What You Need	Open space
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

12. Shake It Out & Wake It Up

Not every drama warm-up needs to be a game. Sometimes students simply need a few minutes to wake up their bodies, voices, and attention before beginning rehearsal or performance work.

Have students stand with enough room to move safely. Begin by gently shaking out the hands, arms, shoulders, legs, and feet. Add shoulder rolls, gentle stretches, and relaxed movements of the neck without forcing any stretch or movement.

Next, have students loosen their faces. Finish with a few comfortable breaths followed by simple vocal sounds such as humming, gentle “mmm” sounds, easy lip or tongue exercises, or a few clearly repeated phrases. The objective is not volume. Students should feel more physically relaxed, vocally awake, and ready to participate.

Skills Practiced	Physical readiness, vocal readiness, breathing, articulation, focus
What You Need	Nothing
Approximate Time	5–10 minutes

Teacher Tip: Vocal warm-ups should never hurt. Encourage comfortable breathing and sound rather than shouting or forcing the voice.

Choosing the Right Drama Warm-Up for Your Class

Different classes need different kinds of warm-ups on different days. If students arrive with lots of energy and have difficulty concentrating, Count to 20, Mirror Partners, or Zip, Zap, Zop can redirect that energy toward listening and focus.

If the group seems hesitant or self-conscious, Name & Motion, Sound & Movement Circle, or Yes, Let's! can encourage participation in a setting where the entire group supports individual choices.

When students need to become more physically engaged, try Emotion Walk, Character Walks, or Shake It Out & Wake It Up. When you want students thinking creatively, What Are You Doing? or One-Word Story can quickly move them into an improvisational mindset.

There is no single warm-up that works best for every drama class. As you get to know your students, build a collection of dependable activities and choose the one that best prepares them for the work you have planned that day.

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