

MOVEMENT & PHYSICAL WARM-UP GAMES FOR DRAMA CLASS

12 Practical Activities for Physical Expression, Characterization & Ensemble Awareness

Why Use Movement Warm-Ups in Drama Class?

Actors communicate long before they say a line. The way a character enters a room, stands while listening, reacts to another person, moves across the stage, or occupies space can tell an audience a great deal about who that character is and what they are feeling.

For young actors, physical performance does not always come naturally. Some students may become stiff or self-conscious when they know other people are watching them. Others may move constantly without making purposeful acting choices. Movement warm-ups give students an opportunity to become more aware of their bodies and the performance space before asking them to apply those skills to a scene or character.

Used intentionally, these activities can help students notice posture, balance, gestures, facial expressions, use of space, movement speed, and the physical differences between characters. They can also practice responding to other performers without immediately relying on dialogue.

Quick Reference Guide

Warm-Up	Primary Focus
Neutral Walk	Body awareness, use of space, physical characterization, focus, observation
Walk the Numbers	Energy, physical control, characterization, pacing, emotional expression
Freeze and Change	Physical expression, imagination, reaction, body awareness, commitment
Mirror	Observation, concentration, physical control, ensemble awareness, nonverbal communication
Moving Through Different Environments	Imagined circumstances, sensory awareness, physical expression, concentration
Character Walks	Characterization, physical choices, imagination, status, emotional expression
Lead With a Body Part	Physical characterization, body awareness, experimentation, character development
Statue Gallery	Physical expression, facial expression, observation, nonverbal storytelling, ensemble work
Movement Telephone	Observation, physical memory, concentration, precision, ensemble participation
Group Stop and Start	Ensemble awareness, concentration, peripheral awareness,

	nonverbal communication, cooperation
Emotion in Motion	Emotional expression, physical choices, objectives, characterization, subtext
Slow-Motion Scene	Physical control, reactions, ensemble timing, facial expression, spatial awareness

1. Neutral Walk

Have students spread throughout the available space and begin walking at a comfortable pace. Ask them to avoid walking in a circle or simply following another person. Instead, they should continually notice the open spaces in the room and change direction as needed.

Once the group is moving comfortably, encourage students to become aware of their posture, pace, arms, shoulders, facial expression, and where they are looking. The goal at first is simply to walk as themselves without deliberately creating a character.

From there, introduce changes. Ask students to walk slightly faster, then slower. Have them imagine that they are very confident, uncertain, tired, excited, worried, or trying not to be noticed. Encourage them to change their physical behavior without speaking.

Afterward, discuss what changed. Did confidence affect posture? Did nervousness change the length of a student's steps? Did being tired affect the shoulders or head?

Skills Practiced	Body awareness, use of space, physical characterization, focus, observation
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2. Walk the Numbers

Explain that 1 represents extremely low physical energy and 10 represents an exaggerated amount of energy. Have students begin walking through the room at approximately a 5. Call out different numbers and ask them to adjust their physical energy accordingly.

At a 2, movement may become slow and heavy. At an 8, students might move with considerably more urgency and energy. A 10 can become deliberately exaggerated, provided students remain in control and move safely.

Then connect energy levels to acting situations. What energy level might someone have while reluctantly getting ready for school? Waiting to hear important news? Entering their own surprise party? Trying to finish something before time runs out?

Students should discover that physical energy does not necessarily mean volume. A character can have tremendous physical intensity without shouting.

Skills Practiced	Energy, physical control, characterization, pacing, emotional expression
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3. Freeze and Change

Students walk naturally through the performance space until the teacher calls, “Freeze!” Everyone immediately stops and holds their current position. Give the students a new physical instruction before allowing them to move again.

Possible instructions include:

- Move as though you are carrying something extremely heavy.
- Move as though the floor is very hot.
- Move as though you are trying not to wake someone.
- Move as though you have just heard wonderful news.
- Move as though you are entering a place where you do not belong.
- Move as though everyone in the room is watching you.

After several rounds, allow students to suggest appropriate circumstances of their own. Encourage them to communicate the situation physically rather than immediately adding dialogue or sound effects.

Skills Practiced	Physical expression, imagination, reaction, body awareness, commitment
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4. Mirror

Divide students into pairs and have them stand facing one another. One student begins as the leader and slowly moves their arms, hands, head, upper body, or entire body while the other student attempts to mirror those movements as precisely as possible.

Remind the leader that this is not a contest designed to trick the other performer. Slow, deliberate movement usually makes the exercise more valuable.

After a short period, switch leaders. For a more challenging version, ask students to continue without identifying a leader. Both performers should watch one another closely enough that the movement begins to feel shared. This version requires considerably more concentration because each student must simultaneously lead and follow.

Skills Practiced	Observation, concentration, physical control, ensemble awareness, nonverbal communication
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5. Moving Through Different Environments

Ask students to imagine that the classroom has become a completely different environment.

Possibilities include:

- Deep snow
- Strong wind
- Thick mud
- Shallow water

- A crowded hallway
- A dark room they have never entered before
- A very narrow ledge
- An extremely hot outdoor space

Students should consider how the imaginary environment affects their balance, pace, posture, breathing, and attention. Encourage them to resist the temptation to make every environment enormous or cartoonish. Sometimes a smaller physical adjustment can communicate the imagined circumstances more effectively.

Afterward, ask students what helped them believe in an environment that was not actually there.

Skills Practiced	Imagined circumstances, sensory awareness, physical expression, concentration
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6. Character Walks

Once students are comfortable moving through the room as themselves, begin experimenting with characters. Give students a character description without telling them exactly how that character should move.

Possible descriptions include:

- Someone who believes they are the most important person in the room
- Someone trying desperately not to attract attention
- Someone who is late but does not want anyone to know
- Someone entering a place they have always dreamed of visiting
- Someone who is suspicious of everyone around them
- Someone pretending to be much more confident than they actually feel

Allow students to decide how the circumstances affect posture, pace, eye contact, gestures, and use of space. There is no single correct character walk. Two students can receive exactly the same description and make very different choices that are equally believable.

Skills Practiced	Characterization, physical choices, imagination, status, emotional expression
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7. Lead With a Body Part

Ask students to walk through the room normally. Then have them imagine that a particular part of the body is gently leading their movement.

Try the nose, chin, chest, shoulders, stomach, or knees. Students should explore how changing the physical center of their movement affects the rest of the body.

After experimenting with several possibilities, ask what kind of character each movement suggests. A character who seems to lead with the chest may feel very different from one whose shoulders or knees appear to lead.

The goal is not to create stereotypes but to demonstrate how a relatively small physical choice can begin influencing characterization.

Skills Practiced	Physical characterization, body awareness, experimentation, character development
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8. Statue Gallery

Give students an emotion, situation, or character quality and ask them to create a frozen physical pose that communicates it.

Possibilities include confidence, fear, excitement, suspicion, exhaustion, pride, confusion, or someone who has just been caught doing something.

Once everyone has frozen, allow students to observe the different choices around the room. Discuss how posture, facial expression, hand position, body angle, and use of levels can communicate information without dialogue.

For another variation, divide the class into small groups and ask each group to create a frozen picture showing a situation. The rest of the class can interpret what they think is happening.

Skills Practiced	Physical expression, facial expression, observation, nonverbal storytelling, ensemble work
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9. Movement Telephone

Arrange students in a line or small groups. The first student creates a short sequence of approximately three physical movements. Only the next student watches.

That student then performs what they remember for the third student, who passes it to the next person, continuing until the movement reaches the end of the line. Have the first and final students perform their versions for comparison.

The activity often becomes funny as small physical details change, but it also gives students an opportunity to think about careful observation and the importance of specific physical choices. Discuss which parts of the movement were easiest to remember and which details disappeared along the way.

Skills Practiced	Observation, physical memory, concentration, precision, ensemble participation
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10. Group Stop and Start

Have the entire class walk through the room. At first, the teacher calls “Stop” and “Go.” Students should respond together while remaining aware of the space and one another.

Then remove the teacher commands. The group's challenge is to stop walking at approximately the same time without anyone verbally announcing when to stop. After the group has stopped, they must also begin moving again without a spoken signal.

Students should not appoint a secret leader. The purpose is to develop awareness of the entire ensemble. The exercise may take several attempts before students begin noticing subtle changes in the group's movement and energy.

Skills Practiced	Ensemble awareness, concentration, peripheral awareness, nonverbal communication, cooperation
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11. Emotion in Motion

Give students a simple everyday action, such as entering a room, looking for something, sitting in a chair, picking up an object, or waiting for someone. Then assign an emotion or circumstance.

A student might enter the room while excited, sit down while extremely nervous, search for an object while frustrated, or wait for someone while trying to hide impatience.

Repeat the same action with a different emotional circumstance. This helps demonstrate that an actor does not necessarily need elaborate movement to communicate emotion. The same basic action can look very different depending on what the character wants and feels.

Skills Practiced	Emotional expression, physical choices, objectives, characterization, subtext
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12. Slow-Motion Scene

Divide students into pairs or small groups and give them a simple physical situation.

Possible situations include:

- Two people reaching for the same object
- A group discovering something surprising
- Someone trying to get through a crowded space
- Several people reacting to something falling
- A group celebrating a victory

Students perform the action in exaggerated slow motion. Moving slowly forces performers to become more aware of balance, facial expressions, gestures, reactions, and the physical relationship between characters.

Remind students that slow motion does not mean simply moving normally with occasional pauses. The entire action should remain controlled and continuous.

Skills Practiced	Physical control, reactions, ensemble timing, facial expression, spatial awareness
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Helping Students Move Without Becoming Self-Conscious

Physical acting can make some students feel more exposed than speaking lines. A student who is comfortable reading dialogue from a script may suddenly become hesitant when asked to cross the room as a character or communicate an emotion without words.

It can help to begin with exercises in which the entire class is moving simultaneously. Students are less likely to feel that everyone is watching them when everyone has a task of their own. Teachers can also emphasize experimentation rather than performance. During a warm-up, students do not need to discover the perfect way to portray a quality; they are trying possibilities and noticing what happens.

As students become more comfortable, exercises can gradually move from whole-group participation to pairs, small groups, and eventually individual performance.

Encourage Specific Choices Instead of Bigger Choices

When young actors are told to become more expressive, they sometimes interpret that instruction as a request to make everything larger. Gestures become enormous, facial expressions become exaggerated, and characters begin moving constantly. Sometimes that may be appropriate, particularly in a broad comedy. Often, however, the more useful question is whether the physical choice is specific.

Instead of telling a student simply to move more, ask what the character is physically doing and why. Is the character avoiding eye contact? Trying to appear confident? Moving toward something they want? Keeping distance from another person? Attempting to hide nervousness? Those questions connect movement to character objectives and circumstances.

Connect Movement Warm-Ups to Scene Work

Movement exercises become especially useful when students begin applying what they discover to actual scenes. After completing a character walk, for example, students can take one physical quality they discovered and incorporate it into a character they are rehearsing. After practicing statues, students can examine the opening moment of a scene and consider what their posture communicates before the first line is spoken.

The same approach can be used with emotional movement, imaginary environments, status, or ensemble awareness. Warm-ups are not simply games played before the real acting begins; they are opportunities to isolate and practice skills that actors use during performance.

Keep Physical Drama Activities Safe

Before beginning movement exercises, make sure students have enough room to participate safely. Chairs, backpacks, tables, cords, and other obstacles should be moved when possible, and students should understand the physical boundaries of the activity.

Running, jumping, contact between students, or movement on the floor should only be included when the space and circumstances make those activities appropriate. Students should remain in control of their own movement. Imaginary circumstances such as strong wind or deep mud should encourage creative physical choices rather than unsafe throwing, falling, pushing, or colliding.

Using Movement to Build More Complete Young Actors

Young performers sometimes focus so heavily on remembering dialogue that the physical life of a character receives very little attention. Movement warm-ups provide a low-pressure way to introduce the idea that acting involves the entire body.

Over time, students can begin noticing how posture, gestures, pace, spatial relationships, physical energy, facial expressions, and reactions contribute to a performance. Those skills can then become part of character development, improvisation, scene work, monologues, and more complex performances. The goal is not to prescribe how a student should move, but to give young actors enough awareness and experience to begin making purposeful physical choices of their own.

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