

# Improvisation Games for Science Communication

## *A few select games for team and skill building*

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Improvisational theater games are increasingly valued as effective science communication skill-builders, popularized in part by the [Alan Alda Center for Communication Science](#) at Stony Brook University. Improv can help scientists to think more quickly on their feet, connect with their audience, and, perhaps most critically, be better listeners. UNAVCO uses improvisational theater games in our workshops as a way to break tension, build trust, teach communication skills, and have fun with participants.

The following games are activities geared toward improving communication skills. These games were not developed by, but have been used by, UNAVCO.

### **A Listening Challenge**

- Participants in pairs, standing or sitting
- Define Participant A and Participant B
- Facilitator asks a question. It doesn't have to have anything to do with science; it could be, "What was your favorite thing about yesterday, and why?"
- A asks B the question
- A must then **ONLY LISTEN**. They can nod and mm-hmm and give other physical indications that they are listening, but they are not allowed to say **anything**, not even to ask a follow-up question.
- Switch, with the same question or a different one
- Reflect: How did that feel? How did you know whether someone was listening?

This can feel contrived and difficult, but is intended to explore the idea that listening is a skill, and it can be harder for some of us than others to do it and do it well.

### **What Are You Doing?**

- Participants in a circle, standing
- Whoever goes first (pick or have a volunteer) starts acting out an action of their choice, e.g. fishing
- The person to their left asks, What are you doing?
- The first person replies by stating an action different from what they are doing and that the person next to them must now act out, e.g., collecting rock samples
- The asker then acts out the stated action, e.g. collecting rock samples
- The next person to the left asks, What are you doing?
- The process continues, moving clockwise around the circle

This game is mainly for fun, breaking tension, practicing thinking on your feet, and listening. It's a good warm-up to other games, or simply a way to move a little after a session of classroom sitting.



### **What's in the Box?**

- Participants in pairs, sitting or standing
- Define Participant A and Participant B
- Assign either A to be the keeper of a box
- Invite A to define their box's size and shape with their hands
- Invite B to ask about what is in the box
  - The challenge: B may not ask any yes or no questions
- A invents answers to each of B's questions
- Switch
- Reflect: What types of questions worked well, and which didn't?

This game explores questions that lead to conversation. It also allows the box-holder to practice thinking on their feet. As a variation, have the box-holder ask the questions about what the "visitor" thinks or feels about the box, or any actual prop. Again, no yes or no questions. This allows the exploration of questions that encourage inquiry and connection. (In general, questions starting with Who, What, How, Why, and Where work well, while questions starting with Do are often a dead end.)

### **Mirror, Mirror // Follow the Leader**

- Participants in pairs (standing)
- Define Participant A and Participant B
- Assign either A or B to lead, the other to follow
- Invite leader to move, follower to try to mirror movements
- After the game starts, inform leader that their goal is to have the follower be able to follow them (does this change how they move, e.g., how quickly?)
- Switch
- Reflect: How might this apply to science communication?

We often "lead" differently when we want someone to be able to follow; many leaders will start by moving quickly, to try to "beat" their follow. With the intention of wanting someone to be able to follow, leaders will slow down, and pay more attention to their follower.



## Ask an Expert // Multi-headed Expert

(Follows Mirror, Mirror well)

- Participants in groups of 3-4
- Warm-up: Have the groups do Mirror, Mirror, above, but with no leader and no follower; everyone leads, and everyone follows, with the goal of being in synch (it helps to move slowly)



*RESESS interns try simultaneously leading and following, as a group.*

- Two groups stand facing each other, each in a line, shoulder to shoulder (linking arms optional)
- Facilitator (or if there's another group sitting out, the 'audience') asks one group a question
- Each group responds as one individual, who speaks by each participant saying only one word at a time, in order

This game is pure improv. No one knows what's coming next. It's also very hilarious, for everyone. The sentence is done when the sentence is done. This works people's active listening skills, both for content and 'feel' (when is the sentence done?).

The facilitator continues to ask both 'scientists' questions, moderating a debate. The facilitator can choose how much information to provide to the scene. For example, the facilitator may start off by saying, 'We'd like to welcome everyone to today's debate on the best way to make pickles.'

Variation: Instead of speaking one word at a time, each 'scientist' must speak with **one voice**, everyone on the team speaking simultaneously. No followers, no leaders. This can be **very** challenging, especially for people who really want to lead. Listening and patience and being willing to go wherever the team takes the answer is key. Not only does no one know what word is coming next, but often no one knows how a word will end!



*RESESS interns describe how to make spaghetti, in a unified voice.*

We recommend doing both variations, in the order described here.

On the show Drew Carey's Improv-a-Ganza, this game is played in pairs, with both variations represented:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7YS8JbbqyQ>

Have fun!