

FOR ACTORS ABOUT 8 TO 12

The Kids Actor's Guide

Eleven short chapters, one big idea each, and something to try in every one.

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Hi, actor!

Hi, actor. This guide is for you. It is made of the things I learned getting a theatre degree, the things I learned teaching kids in classrooms, camps and shows, and the best ideas from the acting books on my shelf. Every chapter has one big idea and one thing to try. You can read it in order, or jump to the part you need today.



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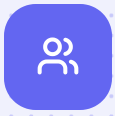
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CHAPTER 1

Hi, actor!

Acting is pretending on purpose.

You already know how to pretend. You have been a dragon, a teacher, a pirate, a dog. Acting takes that and adds one thing: you do it so that other people can see it, hear it, and believe it.

Actors use six tools. You carry all six with you everywhere:

Tool	What it does
Face	Shows what your character feels
Body	Shows who your character is and what they are doing
Voice	Lets the back row hear you, and shows how your character talks
Imagination	Makes the pretend real to you, so it looks real to us
Focus	Keeps you in the story, even when you are not talking
Listening	Lets you react to what really just happened

TRY THIS

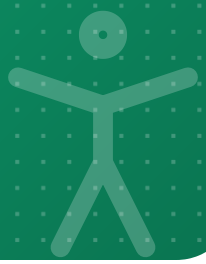
One tool at a time

Pick a feeling, like *excited*. Show it with only your face. Now only your body, face totally still. Now use both. Which one was hardest?

CHAPTER 2

Your body

Your body talks before you say a word.



A queen walks differently from a sneaky cat. A tired grandpa sits differently from a kid who just won a prize. When you build a character, start with how they move: are they fast or slow? Do they lead with their nose, their chest, or their feet? Do they take up a lot of space or a little?

Stillness is a superpower. When you stop wiggling, the audience looks at you. A frozen actor who means it is more interesting than a moving actor who does not.

Face the audience. Your face is how we see the story. When you can, stand so we can see you. If you have to turn, turn just a little, not your whole back.

Uta Hagen, a famous acting teacher, said that real things happen in real bodies. When your character picks up a cup, your hand should know how heavy it is, even if the cup is pretend.

TRY THIS

The emotion walk

Walk around the room normally. That is *neutral*. Now walk HAPPY: face, arms, feet. Now SNEAKY. Now PROUD. Now like your shoes are too big. Now like gravity just doubled. Then freeze, and say "I found the treasure" the way you are feeling.

TRY THIS

Pretend cup

Pick up a pretend glass of water. Feel how cold it is. Drink it. Put it down where you can find it again. Now pick up a pretend bowling ball. What changed in your whole body?

CHAPTER 3

Your voice

Loud is not the same as big.

On stage you need the person in the very last row to hear every word. But yelling makes your voice tight and scratchy, and it makes it hard to understand you. What you want is your **stage voice**: big, clear, and coming from your belly, not your throat.

Think of voices on a scale of 1 to 5:

Level	What it sounds like
1	Whisper
2	Small voice
3	Regular talking
4	**Stage voice**
5	Too loud

Level 4 is the goal for almost everything you say on stage. Practice line: *"The dragon is behind you!"* at Level 4.

Kristin Linklater, a voice teacher, believed everyone already has a free, natural voice, and that most of voice work is getting the tight, tense stuff out of the way. That starts with breath.

TRY THIS

Belly breath

Put one hand on your belly. Breathe in through your nose so your hand moves out, not your shoulders up. Let it out on a long, easy "haaaaa." Do it three times. Now say your Level 4 line on that same easy breath.

TRY THIS

Tongue twisters

Say each one slow first, then with a clap on every word, then a little faster. Never sloppy.

- Red leather, yellow leather.
- Unique New York.
- Toy boat. (Say it five times fast. It is harder than it looks.)

CHAPTER 4

Your imagination

Believe it first, and we will believe it too.

A long time ago in Russia, an actor and director named Konstantin Stanislavski wrote about something he called the **magic "if."** You do not have to *be* a pirate. You just ask: *what would I do **if** I were a pirate on a ship that was sinking?* That little word "if" opens the door. Your imagination does the rest.

The more details you imagine, the more real it gets. Not just "a forest," but: is it dark? Is it cold? What does it smell like? What is that sound behind you?

TRY THIS

The magic object

Hold out your hands. There is something in them. Mime using it: is it a hat? A phone? A tiny kitten? Show us without words. If you are with a friend, pass it to them, and they turn it into something new.

TRY THIS

Obvious, funny, weird

For any pretend thing, there are three kinds of ideas. For "something in a backpack": a lunchbox is *obvious*, a flying sandwich is *funny*, a backpack that tells lies is *weird*. All three are allowed. Weird is very allowed.

CHAPTER 5

What does my character want?

Every character wants something. That is what makes a story go.

This is the most important question in acting, and both Stanislavski and Uta Hagen built their teaching around it. Your character always wants something, and something is always in the way.

- **What do I want?** *(the cookie)*
- **What is in my way?** *(the cookie jar is on the top shelf, and a grown-up said no)*
- **What will I try?** *(ask nicely, climb a chair, blame the dog)*

When you know what your character wants, you always know what to do on stage, even when you are not talking. You are watching the cookie jar. You are waiting for your chance.

TRY THIS

One line, three wants

Say "Can you open the door?" three times. First, you want to get out because you are scared. Then, you want to surprise someone on the other side. Then, you really, really need the bathroom. Same words. Totally different scene.

CHAPTER 6

Saying yes

Improv is acting without a script, and it runs on one rule.

The rule is **"Yes, and."** When your partner gives you an idea, you say yes to it (you accept it as true), *and* you add something new. If they say "Look, a spaceship!" you do not say "No, it's a bus." You say "Yes, and it's landing in our backyard!"

Viola Spolin invented many of the theatre games that kids around the world still play. She believed games are the best way to learn acting, because when you are busy playing, you forget to be nervous. Keith Johnstone, another improv teacher, noticed that the scenes that work are the ones where actors accept each other's ideas, and the ones that fall apart are the ones where actors keep saying no. Big improv theatres like UCB and Second City still teach these same ideas to grown-ups today.

A choice is a gift. When you tell your partner who they are ("Grandma, you forgot your glasses!"), you have done the hard part for them. They do not have to make anything up. They just take it and go. Giving gifts is the kindest thing you can do on stage.

Make your partner look good. If you try to be the funniest person in the scene, the scene usually dies. If you try to make your partner look brilliant, it works, and you look great too.

TRY THIS

Yes, Let's!

With a group, someone shouts an idea: "Let's all be dragons!" Everyone yells "YES, LET'S!" and does it. Then the next person shouts a new idea.

TRY THIS

Gift giving

With a partner, hand them a wrapped pretend present. They open it, decide what is inside, show it to you, and are *thrilled* about it. Then flip it: you say what it is as you hand it over ("Here, it's a live eel!"), and they still have to love it.

TRY THIS

One-word story

Sit with a friend or a family. Tell a story one word each, taking turns. "Once... upon... a... pickle..." Do not plan ahead. Just say the next word.

CHAPTER 7

Learning lines

Lines stick when you learn them in small bites, out loud, and many times.

Here are tricks that work:

1. **Learn your cue too.** Your cue is the line right before yours. If you only know your line, you will not know when to say it.
2. **One bite at a time.** Learn one line, then the next, then say both together. Then add a third.
3. **Say it out loud and move.** Walk around, act it out. Your body helps your brain remember.
4. **Know what you mean.** If you understand *why* your character says it (what do they want?), the words are easier to remember.
5. **Sleep on it.** Practice right before bed. Your brain keeps working on it while you sleep.
6. **Run them with a helper.** A grown-up or friend reads everyone else's lines, and you say yours.

If you mess up on stage, keep going. The audience does not have the script. If you forget a line, say what your character would say, in your own words. That is called staying in character, and real actors do it all the time.

TRY THIS

Run your lines with a computer

Line Runner reads the other parts out loud and waits for you to say yours, so you can practice alone.

CHAPTER 8

Auditions and shows

Everyone gets nervous. Nervous means you care.



Auditions. An audition is when you show a director what you can do so they can decide who plays which part. Tips:

- Say your name and what you are doing in a clear Level 4 voice.
- Make a choice and commit. A big brave choice is better than a small safe one.
- If you mess up, smile, take a breath, and start the line again. Directors like seeing that.
- When you are done, say thank you. Then you are done. The rest is the director's job, not yours.

Not getting the part you wanted happens to every actor who has ever lived, including the famous ones. It does not mean you are not good. Directors are building a whole puzzle, and sometimes they need a different shape. Every part is real acting. Small parts are how you learn the most.

Rehearsals are where the show gets built. You will do the same scenes over and over. That is the job. Write your blocking (where you stand and move) in pencil in your script.

Tech week is the week right before the show, when lights, sound, costumes and the set all come in. It is long, and there is a lot of waiting. Bring a book. Stay quiet backstage. Be ready when they call you.

Show day. Before you go on: belly breath three times, shake out your hands and feet, and remember what your character wants. When you are on stage, focus on your partner and the story, not on the audience.

The bow. Walk on, stand together, bow at the same time, and smile. You earned it.

CHAPTER 9

Being a great castmate

The show is a team. You are part of it, even when you are not on stage.

- **Listen.** On stage, really listen to your scene partner every time, like you are hearing it for the first time.
- **Be in the scene when you are not talking.** If you are on stage, you are in the story. React. Watch. Breathe.
- **Cheer for everybody.** When someone else does well, it makes the whole show better. Tell them.
- **No spotlight-hogging.** Do not pull focus while someone else is talking. Their moment is your moment too.
- **Backstage is quiet.** The audience can hear more than you think.
- **Be kind about mistakes.** Everybody messes up. In a good cast, nobody laughs at anybody, only with them.
- **Keep it clean.** A good rule for any scene: nothing you could not do in front of your grandmother and your principal at the same time.

TRY THIS

The compliment circle

After practice, go around the group. Everyone says one specific thing someone else did well. "I liked how your robot walked." Ending proud is part of the job.

GROWN-UPS, THIS PART IS FOR YOU

CHAPTER 10

For grown-ups

This page is for the parent, grandparent or caregiver of a young actor.

What theatre gives kids. Confidence speaking in front of people, the ability to work on a team, memory, empathy (spending an afternoon being someone else is very good practice at imagining how other people feel), and the experience of finishing something hard together. Most kids who do theatre do not become actors. They become adults who are comfortable in a room.

How to help:

- **Run lines without nagging.** Offer to read the other parts. Keep it short (10 to 15 minutes) and let them stop. If they get stuck, give them the first word, not the whole line.
- **Ask about the story, not just the lines.** "What does your character want?" builds more than "Do you know your lines yet?"
- **Praise effort and specifics.** "You were so loud and clear in that scene" lands better than "You were the best one."
- **Expect tech week to be tiring.** Late nights, waiting around, nerves. Pack snacks, a water bottle and a book, and plan a calm evening after.
- **After the show,** tell them one specific moment you loved. Skip the notes. The director already gave them.

When they don't get the part. Let them be disappointed; it is a real feeling. Then help them see that every part is real acting, and that the kids having the most fun are often the ones in the ensemble. Avoid blaming the director or other kids, even privately. They will hear it.

What a good kids' program looks like:

- No elimination games where kids get sent to sit out.

- Shy kids get a real job (sound effects, a prop, being part of the stage picture), not a spotlight they did not ask for.
- Every kid gets a moment, and nobody is mocked for a mistake.
- The teacher sets clear content limits for scenes and enforces them.
- Rehearsal schedules arrive well ahead of time, and you are welcome to ask questions.

Warning signs worth asking about: a child is regularly left out or singled out in front of the group; adults are alone with a child behind closed doors; you are not allowed to watch or ask questions; your child dreads going and cannot say why. Trust your instincts and ask.

CHAPTER 11

Where these ideas come from

I studied theatre at Virginia Tech and have taught kids in classrooms, camps and community shows. These are the books on my shelf that shaped this guide. They are written for grown-up actors and teachers, but if you are curious, go find them.

Book	Who wrote it	What it taught this guide
An Actor Prepares	Konstantin Stanislavski	The magic "if," and that every character wants something
Respect for Acting	Uta Hagen	Real objects, real bodies, and what is in your way
Freeing the Natural Voice	Kristin Linklater	Breath, and letting your real voice out
Improvisation for the Theater	Viola Spolin	Learning acting through games
Impro	Keith Johnstone	Accepting ideas, and why "no" stops a scene
The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual	Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, Matt Walsh	"Yes, and," and building a scene together

The games in this guide come from my own teaching. Have fun with them. Break a leg.

Kate



Break a leg!

Practicing lines? Line Runner reads the other parts out loud and waits for yours.

k8mak.com/tools/line-runner