Improvisation, or improv – performance without a script – is incredibly fun. Playing together away from a regulated sports field or a had-to-be-there sporting event or terrific story: What's going to happen next? Wow will it turn out for the people I'm rooting for? How oppositely, starts with that spontaneous excitement and danger, and aims to appear magically scripted. Great improv has the excitement of a had-to-be-there sporting event or terrific story: What's going to happen next? Wow will it turn out for the people I'm rooting for? How are they going to get out of this? Even more, because the show is shaped by the audience's responses and suggestions, they also feel part of it, responsible, just like a sports fan, or playwright.
Improv is set apart by the willingness and rewards of the performers and audience to allow discoveries in the moment. It's theater without a net. When we succeed, it's magic, no one believes we didn't write it, and we all win. If we fail in the earnest attempt to make up an entire musical or detective story or spy-thriller, we're the Chicago Cubs. We're the home team; we lost, but we have the fans' backs, so they get ours.

Improv drives home the fact that art is right there in front of everybody, for the taking. Passive arts separate artist and audience, participant and recipient, dreamers and players from seat-slouchers and nodded-off-in-the-second-act. Improv invites the audience to engage at every level, from imagination, suspension of disbelief, emotional investment, to sing-alongs and full-on on-the-stage playing. If we want 'art' to stop being a dirty word, or to have people identify with it, then we've got to be ready to put ourselves on the line and play with anyone, anywhere.

Improvisation can look like anything. A Broadway musical, a live game show, a sitcom, a movie, modernized Shakespeare, or a one-woman-show. What makes it improvised is that it's made up. There is a spectrum of improv. At one end, we call our shots like Babe Ruth, setting specific challenges for our show in front of the audience. "This next scene will turn into a cartoon." "Could we get the title of a James Bond movie to improvise?" or "When the host rings the bell, all the players must switch characters and continue from that point." Rather misleadingly, this is called 'short-form' improv, though it doesn't have anything to do with time. The most common short-form style is the game-show format popularized by the British and American shows "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?" The audience's suggestions and game rules push the players to greater feats of improvisation as they struggle and sparkle to make everything make sense.

In contrast, towards the 'long-form' end of the improv rainbow, players are more open to discover what their scenes and show will look like once it's started. To paraphrase Robert Frost, "Long-form improv is like playing tennis with the net down." Again, it doesn't matter if your play for 5 minutes or 50 minutes, it's just the degree of openness to discovery of the players and show that determines if it's called short or long form. The challenge for long-form improvisers is to be able to portray specific and believable characters, relationships, and situations that are interesting for their own sake, and then to also have the flexibility, teamwork, and skill to find and follow what's uniquely funny or compelling about each individual scene. A heartfelt conversation might naturally involve a farcical chase, or a couple stereotypical characters who are a little smarter than we expect might sing a biting satirical song. Watching the best improv is like watching the best of anything: we're constantly switching between being caught up in the spectacle and the marvel of the skill required.

The Games

Zip Zap Zop,
Bring the students standing in a circle.

Instructor says 'zip', then passes an imaginary ball to the students.
That student says a new word (in order, 'zip', 'zap' and 'zop') then passes the ball to another student.

Association Ball -
bring the students standing in a circle.
instructor says a word, then passes an imaginary ball to the student.
That student says a new word that the previous word makes them think of, then passes the ball to another student.
Note: If everyone isn't getting a turn, have students put up their hands if they haven't gotten a ball yet.

Story Spine -
A story is told one person at a time using the following pattern:
Once upon a time there was ________,
And every day ________,
Until one day when ________,
And because of that ________,
and because of that ________,
and because of that ________,
until finally ________,
And every day since ________.