

The Fundamentals of Agreement
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When working with a script, an actor knows a lot about the scene they are about to perform. They know where the scene takes place and who their character is. They know the relationship between themselves and the other characters in the scene. They know what they are going to say. And if they are properly prepared, they know what their character wants and what actions they will do to try to get it.

When an improviser begins a scene, they know none of these things. They face a stage that could become any setting they can imagine. They can play any character they choose and so can their scene partner. Their choices are infinite. So at the beginning of an improvised scene, the most important thing they must accomplish is to decide on the circumstances of the scene. And the most important tool for deciding those circumstances is agreement.

Simply put, an improviser must agree to all facts and circumstances that their scene partner establishes via dialogue, behavior or action. If I say that I'm a plumber, you must agree that I'm a plumber. If you act like you are in car, I must accept that. If I say that we are in an airport bar, set down your luggage and grab a drink.

For instance, let's say a player named Molly begins a scene by sitting down and beginning to type something. Next her scene partner Jed enters and says, "I've got those numbers for your report, ma'am," and hands her some papers. The two of them have begun to create the circumstances of the scene. You might think that there isn't much to this scene, that they don't have much that they can agree on yet. Actually they already have quite a lot. Namely, that Molly is using a device with a keyboard; she's working on a report; and that Jed is helping her with the report. This seems pretty obvious, but you would be surprised how often a player will respond by saying something like, "I'm not working on a report, you moron. I'm writing the great American novel." That is the opposite of agreement. That is called denial.

Agreement doesn't just apply to indisputable facts. It also applies to those things that might not be said, but are implied in our actions or our words. In the example above, we might assume that the characters work together in an office, and that Jed works for the Molly (he called her ma'am, after all). It's possible to come to other conclusions about what facts have been implied, and it would be fine to act on them. But whatever the players add to this scene, they need to add information which fits with everything they have established and implied.

Yes Anding

Beyond simply agreeing with their partner, players should add information to the scene with each action or line of dialogue, at least at the beginning. This is often called "yes-anding" your scene partner. Again in the example above, Jed didn't just enter the scene and say, "I see you're typing." That would have simply stopped at agreement. Instead, he added to the circumstances of the scene. They now know that they are working on a report together, and they are one step closer to having a good scene.

Yes-anding is crucial to creating interesting and unique scenes. A good visual analogy is that of a ping pong game. One player serves the ball with their first line of dialogue or their first action. The other player returns the ball by responding to it. Each time the ball crosses the net, a new piece of information is added which makes the scene more specific. A scene shouldn't begin with one player establishing everything by themselves. If you want to initiate a scene about a father and son pirate team who are about attack a British merchant ship during the American Revolution and who are struggling with their incestuous feelings for one another, write it out as a sketch. Don't initiate it. It's too much information for one player to establish without the input of their scene partner. It's like refusing to serve the ball. What's the point of improvising it with a partner? Instead, establish one or two things with your first action or line of dialogue and wait to see what your scene partner will do with it.

Other Facets of Agreement

One thing that agreement means is being agreeable at the beginning of a scene. This is not a universal truth, but it is a good principle to guide you through the beginning of a scene. Make choices that keep your characters in relative harmony. Don't argue with each other. Choose a point of view which agrees with your scene partner. Choose to like the situation that your character is in. What happens all too often at the beginning of a scene, is that one player will pick a fight with the other, many times over issues that are completely trivial. Nothing can tank a scene faster than a fight over something trivial.

You should also generally be agreeable about actions proposed by your scene partner. If your partner says, "Let's give the dog a bath," then you should start running water in the tub or fetch the dog. Don't think about it, don't debate it, just do it, especially if it is an action that you can do on stage in the place you have established.

What if your scene partner suggests doing something that your character would not want to do? All the more reason for your character to do it. We as an audience like seeing characters do things they don't want to do. For instance, your scene partner begins a scene by saying, "Finish your spinach, or you won't get dessert." Well, first thing to know is that you shouldn't argue about it. Be agreeable, eat your spinach.

There is a bit more to it, however. The initiation implies that you do not like spinach, otherwise why would they insist that you finish it? You have to agree to that as well. You don't like spinach. What do you do then? I just told you that you can't argue about it, that you have to eat it. You do. You just don't have to like eating it. It can be quite fun to watch a character do things they don't want to do. So always remember: Do the thing that your character doesn't want to do.

Differences of Opinion

One thing that agreement doesn't mean is that the characters (as opposed to the players) must have identical opinions. If one player establishes that they are standing outside a pink house, the

other player must agree that the house is pink. However, if the first player says that they like the color of the house, the other player could decide that their character isn't so enthusiastic about it. Facts require agreement, matters of opinion don't.

This can be a tricky concept for a new improviser or for one that has been brow beaten by teachers who never let characters disagree on stage. There are some teachers out there who believe you can never say the word "no" in an improvisation. They are dead wrong. You can. Often you can create really incredible scenes with characters who can't agree on anything at all. Note here that the players are still agreeing on all matters that are factual. Their character just might not have the same opinion on it.

This doesn't mean to pick fights over trivial matters. While differences of opinion are not technically denial, the arguments that they cause are often destructive to good scene work, especially for beginners. Your first choice in any scene should be to make your character like the situation they find themselves in. Choose not to argue especially over little things. If it seems natural to have a dissenting opinion about the matter at hand, then give it a try. Even then, make sure you are not simply arguing. It's much easier to keep a scene moving when the dissension is mild rather than a vicious argument.

Respect, Trust and Yes Anding

Agreement cuts both ways. You shouldn't establish something your scene partner won't want to do. That doesn't mean something their character wouldn't want to do, but instead something that they themselves would be uncomfortable doing on stage. This is almost always a judgment call and the standard is quite different depending on the sensibilities of the performers and the level of trust between them.

For instance, it might not be a good idea to start a scene by saying, "Take off your pants so I can ass-rape you." There are some improvisers who would jump at the chance to do that scene, but many others would not. If you make an initiation which makes your scene partner uncomfortable and they refuse to agree to it, you have made the mistake, not them.

Higher Levels of Agreement

Let's say your scene partner starts a scene by saying something like, "I'm really hungry. I wish I had something to eat." They have initiated a problem. It might seem like responding with, "Look there's an apple tree. Let's get an apple," would be a good idea. However, by solving the problem you have denied them. To yes-and a problem, you make the problem worse. A better response might be to say, "There's a restaurant down the road, but it will take a couple of hours to get there on foot." In effect you are saying, "Yes you are hungry, and you won't be eating anytime soon."

Creating problems and making them worse is a great tool for making interesting scenes. Discover a zit on the face of a character who is vain. If you find yourself in room with a dangerous looking robot, make the doors locked. If someone is looking for their lost dog, tell them that you saw one get run over. If someone asks if their wedding dress makes them look fat,

say yes.

Another common mistake players make is to defend themselves. It's a natural tendency to do this in real life. But it doesn't help you in an improvisation. If someone accuses you of something or establishes that you have a negative character trait, don't dispute it, agree to it. If they say, "You're always so mean to me." Be mean to them. If they accuse you of cheating on them, admit that you have and be proud of it. If someone makes your character a racist, embrace that trait. It is fun to be an asshole on stage, and if someone establishes that about your character, treat it as a gift.

What if your scene partner establishes something absurd or crazy? Do you agree with it? That depends on what exactly they initiated, but there are generally two different ways to deal with it.

The first way is to treat the initiation as absurd. Say that you are in the stands at a little league baseball game with the parent of another child. And suppose that they tell you if their child loses that they are going to kill the child's dog. Obviously, they have established themselves as an absurd character, an exaggeration of an overzealous little league parent. If you were to simply say, "Oh that's nice." You aren't yes-anding the fact that they are crazy. In a way you are ignoring it, and thus denying them. Your job then is to be the "straight man" in this situation and to treat them as absurd.

The second way to deal with this initiation is to treat their absurdity as if it is the most normal thing in the world. Say to them, "I hope you kill it in front of them. That will teach them the importance of good sportsmanship." In the first example you are taking their initiation and making them an absurd character. In the second example you are making the world of the scene into an absurd world.

At first glance, agreement is a rather simple and straightforward concept, one basic rule among many that every improviser must learn. But it is far more pervasive than that. Agreement is the very foundation of improvisation and it affects every aspect of your improvised work. It is the closest thing we have to a golden rule or a fundamental theorem. Agreement will never be something you master and then move on from. Instead, it will continue to guide you and challenge you with every scene you create.

If you would like to discuss this essay go to the thread, "The Fundamentals of Agreement" on the main forum.

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