All writers face the challenge of getting started. Whether novice or experienced, they must come to terms with the daunting task of filling up a blank page, or screen, in an effort to produce writing. Student writers are no different. They enter our classes having confronted similar difficulties with discovering what it is they want to say. In seeking to help students, we devote explicit instruction to prewriting, an aspect of our teaching also known as invention in the study of rhetoric. We offer strategies and instructional tools for generating, or inventing, ideas that take the form of written outlines, lists, idea webs, visual maps, and freewriting, and that serve to stimulate thought while providing students with conceptual models for linking and organizing ideas. Less often, though, are students invited to brainstorm in more dynamic, collaborative ways that get them out of their seats and speaking, acting, and moving with others in an environment that fosters spontaneity, inquiry, and creativity.

Given that the capacity to invent is so crucial to writing, it is important that we supplement conventional prewriting with more innovative methods that also spark discovery and require students to move beyond formulaic approaches. Exploring the arts in English language arts opens our practice to new ways of training students to generate, develop, and interact with ideas, while heightening their ability to enter into new conversations and perspectives in a collaborative setting. One area of the dramatic arts that places a high value on the capacity to invent widely, and stands to benefit students in their work as writers, is improvisational theater.

Ask any actor, director, or drama instructor to describe the appeal of improvisational acting and he or she will likely identify the promise of creating something from nothing with others. Unlike stand-up comedy, which emphasizes the quick-witted nature of an individual performer, improvisation tends to emerge from the input of an entire group, drawing on the collective talents, strengths, and imaginations of its members. R. Keith Sawyer writes that improvisational theater is built on the “collaborative creativity” of actors who generate ideas on the spot as they craft never-before-seen characters and scenes together on stage (62). Developing this atmosphere of collaboration, spontaneity, and discovery is something we strive to do in our classrooms, especially when we teach writing. It plays a vital role in injecting life and creative risks into students’ prose, which makes the environment and techniques of improvisation more compatible with our teaching than we might initially think. When we ask students to invent, or brainstorm, we essentially ask them to improvise. We ask them to think off the cuff, suggest ideas spontaneously, converse with others about different thoughts and perspectives, and contribute whatever comes to mind without yet worrying about editing, proofreading, or revising their ideas. Prewriting activities that are based in improvisation then support what we already do with students while offering new pathways to igniting creativity and collaboration in our classrooms.
Exploring these pathways became a touchstone as I started to adapt strategies and exercises familiar to improvisation, or improv, to enrich students’ experiences with prewriting. I first developed the strategy outlined in this article with first-year college students as they brainstormed ideas for a persuasive writing assignment. Students wrote research-based letters to local leaders about a social or environmental problem affecting a nearby community. I incorporated improv into prewriting with the intended goal of improving idea generation among students and encouraging them to create content for writing that grew from authentic and collaborative interactions with others instead of being teacher-driven. Since then, I continue to use this strategy with first-year college students and with preservice English teachers, given that this approach is appropriate for teaching student writers in secondary and postsecondary classrooms. The teachers I have worked with have gone on to adapt it for other forms of writing in their high school English classes, including argumentative writing, writing about a novel, and even writing to apply for a job. Introducing improv-based prewriting to a variety of writing situations can lead students to explore multiple views and generate creative, informed responses to the texts they read and write.

**Improv for Student Writers**

For English teachers, employing performance-based approaches to actively engage students is not a new phenomenon. In fact, recently, in the May 2015 issue of *English Journal*, Melissa Talhelm invites us to imagine our classrooms as “an improvisational performance and learning space” to rethink our interactions with students and their contributions as a valuable part of everyday lessons (15). Using improvisation to explicitly engage student writers, however, has not been explored as deeply. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm describes in “You Gotta BE the Book”: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents that drama allows students to gain “entry into a textual world” through “a meaningful mode for moving around in that textual world, making meaning of it and in it, and of observing and reflecting on the world and its meaning” (128). Similarly, in her book *Assessment Live! 10 Real-Time Ways for Kids to Show What They Know—and Meet the Standards*, Nancy Steineke argues for performance as an authentic form of assessment that “requires students to use higher-order thinking skills” and create a product that is “the result of synthesis, the act of manipulating and transforming knowledge in order to create something new and different” (10).

Having students perform readers theater, spoken-word poetry, and tableaux, for example, represents highly interactive and authentic responses to various texts and promotes elevated levels of critical thinking and engagement. Having students also perform improv-inspired exercises as part of prewriting offers highly engaging methods of interpreting and producing text, while offering students a collaborative and embodied framework for literacy learning.

The objective of asking students to prewrite in unconventional ways is to expose them to new writing strategies and provide meaningful contexts for discovery that go beyond producing evidence of brainstorming for a grade. In their examination of contemporary writing instruction, Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee argue that students’ experience with prewriting is often limited to the creation of thesis statements and written outlines without extensive attention to the contexts, audiences, and purposes for writing (xii). Writing instruction that overemphasizes form and formulaic writing shortchanges important processes whereby students observe, infer, interpret, and synthesize new information to develop their own claims, express their own thoughts, and construct their own arguments.

Deborah Dean writes that students often “have limited knowledge about their topics, they have limited strategies by which to access more knowledge (either in their own heads or outside themselves), and they are reluctant to spend time on these processes that they don’t consider valuable for their writing” (99). Prewriting based in improvisation teaches students how to generate ideas...
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collaboratively, deepens their understanding of an argument or claim, and creates genuine opportunities for students to experience the impact of invention on the quality of their writing.

Saying “Yes, and” as Prewriting

The approach to prewriting I teach is guided by a central tenet in improvisation, which is to affirm, rather than negate, a fellow improviser’s idea. Without this principle, the creative wheels of improv risk coming to a screeching halt. The development of a scene depends largely on “an unspoken agreement between improvisers on stage: ‘You bring a brick, and I bring a brick. Then together, we build a house’” (Halpern, Close, and Johnson 52–53). This method of scene-building is played out in the choices and suggestions improvisers make. For example, one improviser may start a scene by saying, “Hey, Mom, can I borrow the car Saturday night?” while another answers with, “Yes, and you’ll need to fill up the tank when you’re done.” Together, these improvisers affirm the original premise of the scene and build on it to enrich the storyline. In the context of teaching writing, this underlying principle is especially significant given that students often dismiss or judge an idea out of fear they may say or write something wrong or unintelligent. I introduce students to the concept and strategy of “Yes, and” so that they may generate ideas by readily affirming and elaborating on suggestions, ideas, and arguments put forth by themselves and others.

Before students begin brainstorming with “Yes, and” for their persuasive writing assignment, I model the exercise with the entire class. We stand in a circle, away from our desks, pens, pencils, notebooks, and computers, and focus our attention on watching, listening, and responding to each other’s ideas. We start by collaboratively crafting a story about a fictitious character in an imagined situation. I explain to students that our goal is to create a cohesive story by accepting all ideas, which requires that we pay close attention to each person’s suggestion and respond with creative twists and turns. I then ask a student to introduce our story and character with an opening sentence that begins with the proverbial phrase “once upon a time.” After this sentence is shared, each student, in turn, adds a detail to the plot, characterization, or setting by contributing one statement that begins with the words “Yes, and.” Saying these words compels students to affirm and acknowledge what has already been said before introducing a new idea. It also emphasizes the importance of accepting each other’s creative choices without labeling them as “right” or “wrong.”

Inventing with “Yes, and”

Once students have an understanding of “Yes, and” as both an exercise and a framework for thinking, I focus their attention, not on creating a story, but on exploring an important claim, or argument, they want to make in their persuasive letters. In the past, students have identified a range of issues for this assignment, including limited parking on campus, increasing class sizes, and a rise in sports-related injuries. To begin the next phase of this approach to prewriting, students write down their major claim or stance on the issue in a sentence, which forms the basis of the dialogue they perform next in pairs or small groups. Students improvise responses and reactions to each other’s statements in the same way they generate ideas for the collaborative story, although this time they gather ideas, examples, reasons, and evidence they might include in their letters.

I usually time the exercise for approximately two to three minutes, which encourages students to brainstorm as many ideas as possible in the allotted time and to offer spontaneous, in-the-moment responses without rejecting or negating anyone’s suggestions, even their own. While students work in their assigned pairs or small groups, I listen in and coach them through moments when the conversation slows down or when students appear confused. To emphasize the importance of listening and responding off the cuff, I encourage students to wait until the end of the exercise before writing down any thoughts or reactions that emerge so that they maintain a continuous dialogue.

Students produce highly spontaneous conversations that reveal associations and patterns in their thinking. One idea or suggestion often leads to another, which likely sparks some kind of connection or relationship to a third idea in students’ minds. The improvised dialogue, for the most part, reflects ideas, thoughts, and opinions inspired by
the statement students write; however, I remind students to embrace all ideas even if they appear unrelated at first. These ideas also play a vital role in stimulating processes of discovery. Kim and Margaret, two detail-oriented and sometimes outspoken students, performed “Yes, and” first by focusing on ideas for Kim’s letter. Kim wanted to see increased salaries and improved working conditions for employees at a fast-food restaurant where she worked during the summer. An excerpt from Kim and Margaret’s conversation illustrates the kinds of responses this exercise elicits:

**Kim:** Salaries should be increased for workers who demonstrate high work ethic and morale.

**Margaret:** Yes, and that will create more of an incentive to work harder in sch . . . in your job.

**Kim:** Yes, and this will lead to a higher productive rate from the company.

**Margaret:** Yes, and this will lead to happier, um, customers.

**Kim:** Yes, and customer satisfaction is half of the profit.

**Margaret:** Yes, and more profit will lead to happier stockholders.

**Kim:** Yes, and happier stockholders will lead to more business from those stockholders.

**Margaret:** Yes, and more business from the stockholders will lead to more money going into the company.

**Kim:** Yes, and more money means more money for the employees.

Using “Yes, and” to inspire prewriting contributes to a multifaceted view of the topics and arguments students choose to write about in their letters. It prompts them to work together to produce an array of unplanned responses and provides a concrete way of practicing Peter Elbow’s believing game, which highlights the importance of generating ideas by “trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them” (2). During the “Yes, and” exercise, students must believe each other’s arguments to imagine and invent new ideas from another’s perspective. In an effort to highlight this aspect of “Yes, and,” I often ask students to revise their initial statements to reflect an opposing view, one with which they disagree, and then perform the exercise.

Thinking and acting in this way, though difficult at times, allows students to explore the motivations and rationales guiding alternate views for this assignment. Saying “Yes, and” to an argument and generating new ideas from it is quite different from simply asking students to consider an opposing view in their writing. As a result, students discover and think through the kinds of material that might potentially increase the persuasiveness of their letters, especially in the form of counterarguments that anticipate others’ concerns, thoughts, or attitudes.

**From Improvised Dialogue to Writing**

Drawing on the principles and structures of improvisation to create a learning space for prewriting motivates students to take creative risks, experiment with new ideas, and transform their writing. At different times when teaching with “Yes, and,” I have asked students to perform the exercise both before producing a draft of their letter and in between drafts. While we call it prewriting, it is important to remind students that writers continue to brainstorm ideas throughout composing. When comparing one student’s drafts, I noted the potential of improvisation to help students generate new ideas and demonstrate relationships between them. In the final draft of her persuasive letter, Nicole decided to draw connections between several of her original ideas, which first appeared in a list, to
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Helping her town mayor better understand some of the negative effects of local beach pollution. She transformed this list into three new body paragraphs that combined ideas in convincing ways. Figure 1 compares sections of Nicole’s writing. I have numbered and underlined parts of her letter to illustrate how she reconfigured her major claims and examples.

In her final draft, Nicole established a connection between the declining aesthetic value of the town and its beach, and the financial consequences felt by local businesses and homeowners in the community. She reasoned that these groups would lose out to surrounding areas that offer cleaner beaches and arguably better places to live. These connections reflect aspects of using “Yes, and” as an exercise and a mindset to stimulate processes of discovering, adding, and building upon ideas. Reimagining an approach typically practiced in theater holds the potential of helping students produce more nuanced and complex writing.

Getting in on the Action

At its core, improvisational acting is about inventing a collective response to a dramatic situation. Improvisers create material by tapping into the imagination of an entire group and recognizing each member as a valued resource and collaborator. Adapting principles and practices of improvisation to our classrooms expands students’ perceptions of prewriting while inviting them to experience the collaborative nature of invention. It assists them with developing the capacity to create, which formulaic and predetermined approaches stifle.

1. I would like to thank Ken Lindblom for suggesting that students record their conversations using an iPad, smartphone, laptop, or other device, so that they might return to these conversations later to identify and review material for writing.

2. I videotaped and transcribed this conversation as part of an IRB-approved research study of my classroom.
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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The “Yes, and” statements can be recorded using the Circle Plot Diagram tool. The tool can be used as a prewriting graphic organizer for students writing original stories with a circular plot structure as well as a postreading organizer used to explore the text structures in a book. By students inserting main examples of a story’s plot directly onto the circular interactive, the concepts of structure and plot are reinforced each time the tool is used. When used as a prewriting exercise, the diagram can be printed out and shared with peers and teacher for feedback and revision in this phase of the writing process. http://bit.ly/1IVBzxk

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**Reading Emily**

We do not read to know, but to be known—
the reader comprehended by the poem.

Yet slantwise,
backwards, misconstrued
with words that curve like cosmic space—
the more they turn
the further they return,
the further strayed
the more they stay in place.

As boomerangs flung
fly back home,
so is it with the poem
within her poems—
enigmatic, epigrammatic—
which crooked, slantwise never straight
circumambulate the soul,
slip through the back gate
like a recluse,
who, though unseen,
sees all. We read the lines
she reads between.

—Richard Schiffman

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**Richard Schiffman** is an environmental journalist, poet, and author of two biographies. His poems have been published in the Southern Poetry Review, the Alaska Quarterly, the New Ohio Review, the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Times, and other publications. His forthcoming poetry collection What the Dust Doesn’t Know will be published by Salmon Press. Richard can be reached at richschiff@earthlink.net.

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