

## Improvisation Guidance

**improvise** *vb.* **-vises, -vising, -vised.** **1.** to perform or make quickly from materials and sources available, without previous planning. **2.** to perform (a poem, a play, piece of music etc.), composing as one goes along.  
(Collins English Dictionary 1993)

### 1. Introduction: why include improvisation?

Improvisation is something we all do every day. We have to deal with unexpected situations and events with unknown outcomes and try to resolve what has occurred satisfactorily. It is a core life skill.

Most young children are expert improvisers. When playing, they intuitively create imaginary worlds and assign themselves roles, relationships and objectives within them: "I'm the monster from Mars and you have to escape from me". "You're the robber, I'm the cop".

In a broader, theatrical context, improvisation is a valuable and recognised skill that has much historical resonance. It allows performers the opportunity to investigate spontaneous responses to unfolding situations and interpretations – often providing increased insight and understanding for performers and audiences alike. Good performing artists are able to integrate the spontaneous into their rehearsed work as soon as the unexpected happens. This is the moment when work which performers have learned or rehearsed in the past is recreated afresh in the present, when the actor can truly be said to "own" the material performed.

One of the major principles that underpin the Trinity College London qualifications is the emphasis on encouraging candidates of all ages to relate imaginatively and spontaneously to the work they prepare for their exam. For this reason, improvisation is an integral part of the examination requirements for Grade and Diploma exams in many of our performing strands, including **Acting, Acting in Pairs, Group Drama (Devised), Musical Theatre (solo and pairs), Performance Certificates** (*as part of an elected programme*), **ATCL Performing** (Speech and Drama, Musical Theatre and Performance Arts). In this context improvisation tasks offer candidates the opportunity:

- to be in the present, reacting truthfully to an evolving imagined situation, characters, if relevant, and physical environment

- to demonstrate understanding of their chosen extracts and characters
- to display an imaginative response to a suggestion or stimulus and to demonstrate additional performance skills while doing so
- to be 'doing' something as opposed to 'describing' something – so to be in a state of receiving and being changed by what is coming back to the candidate. This will ensure the scene develops.

## **2. General points about the assessment of improvisation**

The examiner will use the Improvisation task to assess one or more of the above, drawing specifically on the context of the materials presented and on what would most benefit the candidate in terms of illustrating the fullest range of their skills for that particular grade.

The starting point for the improvisation will always be made clear and it will allow the candidate to be actively engaged in acting in the present moment rather than story-telling, reminiscing or describing.

The objective of the task is to primarily assess the candidate's ability to be 'in the present': to create a character, tell a story, or explore a relationship with their environment. The candidate need not focus on dialogue - there need not even be any.

There may be no intervention at all by the examiner, or there might be some. Examiners might intervene in any number of ways, for example they might offer 'please continue but avoid using any words that contain the letter 's', or 'continue, but now you've sprained your ankle' or 'only think about the soles of your feet during the improvisation'. This technique may be used to give the candidate's brain a job to do so they can be free to explore the scene without self-consciousness; it is a purposefully playful intervention. 'Side Coaching' is another technique where the examiner might interrupt the improvisation and offer a development such as, 'and suddenly the roof crashes in/an angel appears/the car explodes/your feet are suddenly nailed to the floor...' This is testing the candidate's ability to remain in character, to embrace the 'development', and again, stay in the present. Or, if there is time, the examiner might take a candidate back to one moment in their improvisation, and ask to show a specific moment again, for example, 'I didn't really believe you saw that ghost at that moment, show me again, but this time, take your time.'

Additionally:

### **2.1. Solo improvisation**

We are also interested in how candidates respond to the space: in their 'dialogue' with the props and images created, and in the emotions and sensations felt in the body. Candidates improvise with their own imagination. The examiner might

consider to what extent the candidate is awake to their real or imagined surroundings and the impulses around them.

## **2.2. Pairs and Groups**

In the same way that the candidate is 'changed' in solo improvisation by every physical and emotional impulse they receive, when working with partners the examiner also considers the candidates' ability to 'change and be changed' by every sentence spoken. We may think of it as a game, one player is batting the ball to the other with every utterance; this changes the recipient, who in turn bats the ball back. Thus, the work is defined as present, alive, dynamic, engaging and truthful. The examiner might also consider to what extent are the candidates creating a shared reality. Have they created the same world? And how skillful is each candidate at trusting themselves and their impulses?

In improvisations at any grade, candidates need *not* feel that they have to bring the work to some kind of meaningful or ingenious conclusion; nor that they need to entertain, please or amuse the examiner. They should trust that if it is truthful, it will be interesting, and that is enough. What is being assessed is the candidate's ability to engage with and present a character within an imagined world – and to sustain that character until asked to stop. Candidates sometimes offer an 'ending' after thirty seconds or so which is, in reality, no more than an admission of the fact that they have run out of ideas. The key there is to *slow down*, to always say 'yes' to developments in the scene, and to remain in the here and now, responding and remaining true to the character they've created.

## **3. How improvisation is assessed in each syllabus strand**

### **3.1. Acting/ Musical Theatre**

When setting the improvisation task in an examination, the examiner will select a stimulus that is within the grasp of the candidate's ability. There are no tricks or hidden agendas. The examiner is not looking for a bravura performance - just a simple, clear, imaginative and direct response to the stimulus.

**Foundation (Grades 1 - 3):** Candidates might for example be asked to act out part of a poem they have spoken (or song they have sung); to present a character from one of their pieces in a different situation (at home, on holiday, at school); to speak to a character from one of their pieces on the telephone; to present another character from the world of that play or song; or to devise a short solo scene with a title or theme taken from one of the performed pieces ("the lost key", "the enchanted forest") or the candidate might be invited to explore the material from a more personal perspective.

**Intermediate (Grades 4 – 5) and Advanced (Grades 6 - 8):** The tasks given will reflect the developing emotional maturity of candidates, and offer them the

opportunity to display more sophisticated performance skills and to demonstrate a more complex imaginative awareness of the dramatic possibilities inherent in their chosen literature, songs or music. Candidates might be asked to act out the role of a main or subordinate character in a narrative poem; to imagine and present possible scenarios that occur before, during or after the events in the performed piece; to give a completely different interpretation of a role they have already performed; to turn a large, public performance into a more intimate one ("Take that speech you have just acted and now imagine that you are saying the same words quietly to a friend while travelling on a bus, and think about how this changes the scene") – or vice versa.

In higher grades, candidates might also be given a situation that picks up the dominant emotion of a performed piece (eg: jealousy in *Othello*, ambition in *Macbeth*) to present a scene which explores that emotion in a different context.

### **3.2. Acting in Pairs/ Performing Certificates Foundation & Intermediate**

**Foundation (Grades 1 – 3) and Intermediate (Grades 4 - 5):** Candidates are asked to perform "A scene developed through improvisation." These are scenes that have been developed through play, theatre games, character work or some other form of story-telling. They may be related to existing dramatic or literary works in some way – using known fictional characters as a starting point for development, for example. The work should have been rehearsed and refined so that the scene has coherence, variations of pace and tone, shaping, progression and an appropriate conclusion. The performers do not necessarily have to have scripted the scene and learned their lines but they should all share an understanding of how the scene develops and how their roles inter-relate within it.

**Advanced (Grades 6-8):** Spontaneous improvisation, or improvisation with minimal preparation time applies at this level. Candidates should show assurance and ability to present complexity. The stimuli for such work might be provided by a piece of text (a snatch of dialogue, the opening line of a scene, a line from a song or poem); by a physical object (a mobile phone with inappropriate text messages being discovered, stolen objects); by a newspaper headline; by a picture; by a piece of music; or by the examiner suggesting the candidates place themselves into a tableau' which comes to life.

Examiners will be looking for evidence of mutual support by the performers and creativity in the creation of motivation, behaviour and language.

### **3.3. Drama Groups (Devised)**

**Foundation (Grades 1 - 3) and Intermediate (Grades 4-5):** See acting in pairs/performance certificate guidance.

**Advanced (Grades 6 - 8):** The examiner will expect to see some evidence of confidence and sophistication. The purpose of this improvisation is to assess the

security of candidates' understanding of situation, plot development, character and relationships in some relation to their devised performance. Examiners might therefore ask the group to repeat the chosen scene but in a different location or period; or change the status of all or some of the roles, or to improvise around what happens before or after the performed scene. Alternatively, the motivation of one of the characters might be changed and candidates would be required to adapt spontaneously to the change in the group dynamic.

### **3.4. Diploma levels**

The standard of work should be spontaneous, thoughtful, sophisticated and often complex. Examiners will encourage the candidate to apply consciously their improvisational skills and techniques to enhance the depth, complexity and integrity in performance.

Diploma candidates perform monologues from historical texts and plays. In order to assess understanding and perception, examiners may ask candidates to:

- repeat the essence of the speech to convey the same sense and narrative but using contemporary or vernacular English instead;
- improvise a scene based on the chosen character but in an imagined situation;
- improvise scenes that demonstrate innermost hopes and fears in imagined situations that are not in the play, similar to 'hot-seating';
- rework a performance – to repeat a performance but with constraints, e.g, candidates who give very physical performances could be asked to repeat their performance but adapting it for radio, or, a restrained and quiet performance may invite a request from the examiner to repeat the role in a manner suitable for a large theatre or outdoor performance space;
- repeat a chosen text in a national or local accent if they feel that the chosen one impedes interpretation; for example; an Australian candidate might have performed the role of Hedda Gabler with a poorly executed 'English' accent. The performance might be clumsy and stilted because of the barrier the candidate creates for her or himself. When asked to improvise and then repeat the role using their own accent, the candidate may discover more truth in the character.

### **4. Modification**

In Acting Solo Grade 8, the candidate 'works with the examiner on a modification of one of the pieces - the stimulus is provided by the examiner'.

'Modification' means the candidate is invited to perform the piece again, using the exact same words, but the examiner will offer a different situation, circumstance and intention. It's on the improvisation spectrum, but for the fact that the same text is spoken. It is an opportunity to see the candidate re-imagine that speech, develop their character, and to see the character reacting truthfully to a very different set of internal and external circumstances - but speaking the same words.

The stimulus offered will specifically allow the candidate to perform the speech in a way that reveals an aspect of their work which may not hitherto have been demonstrated.

## 5. Assessment outcomes

All examiners refer to the published assessment criteria and attainment descriptors for the relevant grade and qualification. However, in addition, the following guidance is offered to support candidates' preparation for improvisation:

Candidates working at a **Distinction level** will confidently demonstrate their ability to enter and inhabit a created, imagined world. The work presented will be credible and in role, with a complete harmony of voice and body and a constant and authentic sense of 'presence'. Originality and inventiveness will be evident and well sustained, varied and display consistent emotional engagement. The work will give the audience the impression of being spontaneous and effortless, and will show a strong sense of progression with, where appropriate, an apt conclusion.

Candidates working at a **Merit level** will demonstrate a good attempt at entering and inhabiting a created world. Much of the work will be credible and in harmony with voice and body, and show a strong sense of 'presence'. There will be evidence of some clear inventiveness and variation, though possibly with some interruption to the flow of the work. There will be clear emotional engagement with the character, at times creating the impression of being entirely spontaneous. The work will show some sense of progression and structure will be evident in the work.

Candidates working at a **Pass level** will show willingness to attempt and perform the task. There will be evidence that the attempted role is understood through appropriate use of voice and body., and there may be some sense of 'presence'. There will be some inventiveness though the execution may be intermittent, and there may be some emotional engagement though not always sustained and little sense of variety or sense of progression to the work presented.

Candidates working at a **Below Pass** level may show a reluctance to perform. There could be evidence of embarrassment, with voice and body not in harmony. There may be little or no sense of 'presence', little or no inventiveness, and some lack of emotional engagement. There may be little or no sense of progression, and/or the attempt may be too brief to be adequately assessed.