



# Always Be Studying

## Types of acting classes and why you should take them

By Jessica Gardner  
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**Acting teacher Kimberly Jentzen with students.**

There is always some aspect of your acting you can work on. To be respected in this business, to keep your skills sharp, to stay confident, and to consider yourself a well-trained actor, you should constantly be studying your craft.

But what class is right for you at this time and at your current skill level? Here is a breakdown of some popular types of classes, as well as thoughts from expert teachers on what these classes can do for your acting.

### **Basic Acting Technique**

**By Aaron Speiser, [Aaron Speiser Acting Studio](#)**

Why should you take a basic acting technique class?

Actors need to take a basic technique class because it creates a foundation that will help you build the rest of your career. Learning the proper techniques and having a strong foundation will increase your ability to develop believable characters, as well as hone such basic acting skills as creating character objectives, actions, and motivation.

Actors in technique class learn about emotional and behavioral reactions and how those affect their lives. You examine your own life experiences and how they may relate to the characters you portray. You also learn how to empathize and not judge characters. Students expand their horizons and learn to think outside the box, from a totally different point of view. These skills are useful not just in acting but in any career field.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

Basic technique is designed to train anyone, from complete novices who are inspired by their dream to make it in Hollywood to experienced professionals who want to advance their careers by adding more substance to their performances.

When the relatively unknown Jennifer Lopez first branched out into acting, she started at the beginning, in my basic technique class. Since then, no one can deny she's become wildly successful in her career and the entertainment

business. I also coached Will Smith on basic technique, even though he was already a veteran actor. Working on his basic technique, according to Smith, added more depth and complexity to his character portrayals.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

A technique class is for all students interested in all types of acting.

## **Meisner Technique**

**By William Alderson, The William Alderson Acting Studio**

Why should you take a Meisner technique class?

Of all the teachers who were considered exceptional and outstanding, Sanford (Sandy) Meisner was the only one who organized a technical, structured, step-by-step approach to the craft of acting. It contains specific works, listening, working moment-to-moment, working off the other actor, not taking anything for granted, not anticipating, the "reality of doing," emotional preparation, breaking down a scene, "as ifs" or particularization, situational scenes or character-driven scenes, how to play from a relationship, and character work.

These are what you would get from a good Meisner class. They're not thrown at you all at once, as in a lot of scene study classes. You work on them until they are rooted in you. They must become habitual. This can happen only by conditioning. That is why Meisner is so good compared with other techniques. It is Pavlovian—conditioning and response.

Meisner will improve your acting while giving you a solid foundation to push off from. There is a craft to acting. It is made up of many components, as are dance, singing, baseball, or football. The components have to be learned in terms of specifics. In life, you don't have to listen. You do in acting.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

With the Meisner technique, everyone has to be willing to go back to theatrical kindergarten, back to the beginning, the ABCs of acting. No one should take a Meisner technique class unless they are of the utmost seriousness about their acting. A preferable age range would be 21 to 32, but that's not written in stone. Sometimes the experience of higher-level students makes it harder to teach them. They have acquired such bad acting habits. The nature of the Meisner work is difficult, so it does require some maturity and a good work ethic.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

Good acting is good acting. Most of the good actors of my generation came from the stage and then went into the movies. They didn't change their way of acting. I have done Broadway, TV, and film. I approach it all about the same.

## **Scene Study**

**By Allen Barton, CEO/Executive Director, Beverly Hills Playhouse**

Why should you take a scene study class?

Virtually all you will do in your professional career is act in scenes. You don't get hired to do exercises. You only very rarely get hired to do monologues. You're hired almost exclusively to act in scenes with other actors, and to do so under a variety of stress levels, budgets, and time constraints. A simple measure of an actor's career is to look at how many scenes he or she is carrying in a given project, and then look at the quality and level of budget behind the project. A star is hired to carry almost every scene of a well-financed project helmed by industry veterans, and most actors would name that as their ultimate goal, whether on stage, in film, or on television.

A scene study class best prepares you for the professional circumstances you will face in your career. You learn to look at a script, by different writers and in different genres; assess what's going on in the story; assess your character's part in that story; rehearse; and learn to collaborate with other actors, and possibly a director as well if the scene is being directed. There is nothing actors will face in a scene study class that they won't face in the real world, from both a technical acting perspective and a getting-along-with-other-people perspective, which is often as important or even more important than pure acting talent to the trajectory of a career.

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What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

Experience is certainly welcome but not required. Many teachers would probably agree that it can be a challenge to undo any previous bad training an actor may have received, so sometimes the inexperienced student actually will move faster.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

Scene study is for actors in all genres, all media. There are no stories being told—in film, on stage, on television, on the Web, on your phone, anywhere—that do not consist of scenes put together in a certain sequence to tell the audience a story. That is the common denominator of all the actor will do: tell stories via scenes.

### **On-Camera Technique**

**By Lena Harris, [Lena Harris Studio](#)**

Why should you take an on-camera class?

There are essential differences between acting for the stage and acting for the motion picture and television industry. On-camera training prepares you to walk on to a film or TV set having mastered techniques specifically for the camera.

There are certain constraints that actors should overcome in front of a camera that are not present in stage acting. For example, it takes studied on-camera technique to work within the limitations often prescribed in blocking scenes, and specifically in close-ups. I use Jack Nicholson's performance in the courtroom scene of "A Few Good Men" to illustrate how to play a bigger-than-life character constrained to a tight close-up. Nicholson's disciplined performance is a true joy to watch, as he is completely relaxed while being fully emotionalized with all his rage and intensity, but without flailing his arms or animating his face, while not moving an inch out of frame.

We all want to play bigger-than-life characters in bigger-than-life circumstances. The challenge is to deliver that intensity while working within the limitations of the medium.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

If you have prior acting knowledge, it can certainly be to your advantage; however, this training is for all levels. Beginners can learn acting techniques in concert with on-camera techniques. Seasoned actors looking to hone their skills can work on character types that are often different from what they have currently on their reels. In each case, the experience is muscle-building, with the distinct advantage that actors are provided with finished, edited scenes that may be emailed and streamed to the industry.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

An on-camera class is a good workout for all actors. There is a tremendous amount of respect in the community for a theater actor, not least because of the length of time for which the actor must be completely and fully connected to the circumstances and to the other characters. This is an arduous workout, physically and emotionally, that I employ in my workshop by shooting three- to four-minute original scenes in one take and without a cut. This strengthens the endurance of actors as they apply their techniques—an ability that is lauded by the industry.

## **Cold Reading**

**By Kimberly Jentzen**

Why should you take a cold-reading class?

Being able to cold read is essential for booking consistently as a professional actor. A successful audition includes the ability to break down a scene quickly, make strong choices, and connect internally with the role and the casting director. This takes skill, and developing this skill can be accomplished effectively in an acting class.

I've discovered that cold-reading classes build confidence and book jobs. Consistently giving good auditions builds confidence and careers.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

I think it is important to study acting foundation with cold reading, so that as you are learning, you are also applying the tools to cold-reading technique and eventually scene study and monologues. Every time you pick up a script for

the first time, you are going to be involved in the very first step of cold reading: assessing the material. So if an actor doesn't understand how to read a scene and break it down, it will be difficult to give consistently inspired auditions. The actor must begin with foundation rather than attempting to "perform" the scene. The performance comes naturally as the actor grabs hold of the life of the character.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

Every medium requires the ability to be proficient in cold reading. If you can cold read, you have a huge leg up on the competition.

### **Classical Acting / Shakespeare**

**By Scott Kaiser, Director of Company Development, Oregon Shakespeare Festival**

Why should you take a Shakespeare or classical acting class?

An actor should take a Shakespeare class for the same reason that an athlete lifts weights: Working on Shakespeare's plays significantly strengthens an actor's ability to handle all other plays and playwrights. If you can handle Shakespeare as an actor, you can handle any text—from Sophocles to Tracy Letts, from a scene on "CSI: Miami" to a commercial for corn flakes.

Working to inhabit Shakespeare's characters, breathing life into their hopes and fears, their passions and flaws, strengthens an actor's ability to play any character in any medium—but in particular those that are not nearly as well-written.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

It's never too soon, or too late, to study Shakespeare. Grappling with his language will always be of benefit, whatever your artistic abilities and goals and wherever you are in your life or career.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

The craft required to act Shakespeare well—the sheer vocal and physical skill—is best utilized in the live theater. But these abilities will also serve an actor in film or television extremely well.

### **Audition Technique**

**By Deb Jackel, The William Esper Studio**

Why should you take an audition technique class?

Having acting talent and being able to audition as a way to demonstrate that talent are not necessarily the same. Auditioning is a skill—a set of skills that can be learned. Some of it is mastering the techniques of auditioning, but a lot of it has to do with understanding oneself. Auditioning has very little to do with talent but everything to do with

having an understanding of what's required of you within the audition. I believe that if actors are talented, are able to overcome their anxiety, and learn to feel empowered in the audition process, they can learn to audition successfully.

I believe in training. That's why I'm a teacher. What's key for me as a teacher is to give my students a strong foundation that will give them the ability to audition in a consistent manner. Actors who are trained and experienced in the techniques of auditioning can be successful in almost any situation; they can deal with anything that's required. Even if the audition room has a crazy vibe, they can remain grounded.

One of the big things that can be helpful in an audition class is being able to practice walking into an audition room in a simulated, safe environment. For many of the classes I teach, I simulate an audition experience. Students have the opportunity to experience what it feels like to audition, in terms of having less time with the material, having to walk in and be professional first, greeting people, chatting, and being interviewed, and then being able to do your artistic and creative work. A lot of actors understand how to be artists, but they don't necessarily understand how to be businesspeople. The audition class prepares actors psychologically and helps them learn how to be empowered and to not feel like they're going to be victimized by the audition process—which is how a lot of actors feel.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

You have to know how to act first before you can figure out how to audition. How are you going to audition if you don't know how to act?

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

My audition classes are meant to give actors the tools they need to audition in any medium. Most good audition classes would do that as well.

## **Movement/Alexander Technique**

**By Sharon Jakubecy, certified Alexander Technique teacher, poise performance coach, and choreographer**

Why should you take a movement or Alexander technique class?

The actor's instrument is his or her entire body. Alexander technique helps you keep your instrument well-tuned by heightening your kinesthetic awareness of your body, teaching you how to calm your nervous system, and giving you tools to release tension that will close you off physically, vocally, and emotionally. With these skills, you are open, centered, focused, and in command of your body and voice. You stand with power, which gives you confidence and vocal resonance. You are connected to your instrument. You will be open because your body has space to move on impulse and with breath. You feel big and therefore capable of accomplishing anything.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

Professional actors quickly understand the benefits of releasing habitual muscular effort, because they are already under the pressure of high-demand situations like auditions, shoots, and rehearsals.

Because total beginners also deal with the demands of life, when they experience the lightness and ease of releasing to their full height and eliminate the pressure of their own tension and slouch, they can appreciate it and apply the skills of Alexander technique to how they drive a car, how they sit at the computer, and how they walk through life. Once they get on stage or on camera, they will already have a mastery of their own body and won't have to unlearn any bad actor habits of pushing and forcing in performance.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

Actors in television, film, and theater all use their entire bodies when performing. In all three realms, they have to cope with high-stakes situations; be open, flexible, and dynamic in performance; and have voices that are free of tension.

## **Improv**

**By Colin J. Sweeney, Westside Comedy Theater**

Why should you take an improv class?

Improv is one of the most important tools to have as a performer. It teaches you to tap into your unique sense of humor and to trust your natural instincts. You'll also learn to relax and gain confidence speaking in front of people, which translates to improved success in auditions, on stage, and in your everyday work and social life.

Casting directors and actors agree that improv helps improve your audition skills. Improv classes build confidence, develop strong listening skills, give you the ability to break down characters in sides, and teach you the structure of comedy.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

Everyone from novices to vets can take introductory improv classes.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

Improv skills are crucial for film, television, and theater. Specific additional skills you can gain involve stage-picture and environment work for theater and subtle body language for film and television.

## **Voice/Diction**

**By Jan Linder-Koda**

Why should you take a voice or diction class?

You should take a voice class to learn how to breathe properly; to connect your chest, middle, and head voices; to find or extend your range; to assist if you have damaged vocal cords; to learn mic technique; to work with the body to create emotional attitudes in your voice; to overcome audition anxiety; and to understand phrasing and emotional

connection.

You should take a diction class if you sound too provincial, or if there is a role you want and the character is from a certain area. I had to take diction classes in Italian, French, and Latin when I was learning to sing. It makes the song sound authentic and real. It could do the same for your acting.

What level should you be at when taking this type of class?

These classes could be helpful for actors of any level.

Is this for actors who want to do television, film, or theater?

I think any training of any kind can only be helpful to any actor. If an actor has a desire to be a great actor, classes are a leg up.

### Links referenced within this article

Aaron Speiser Acting Studio

<http://www.aaronspeiser.com>

The William Alderson Acting Studio

<http://www.alderonstudio.com>

Beverly Hills Playhouse

<http://www.bhplayhouse.com>

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<http://www.backstage.com/bsa/news-and-features-features/los-angeles-acting-schools-and-coaches-spring-1005107122.story>

Lena Harris Studio

<http://www.lenaharris.com>

Kimberly Jentzen

<http://www.kimberlyjentzen.com>

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

<http://www.osfashland.org>

The William Esper Studio

<http://www.esperstudio.com>

Alexander Technique

<http://www.alexandertechniquela.com>

Westside Comedy Theater

<http://www.westsidecomedy.com>

Jan Linder-Koda

<http://www.angeldivamusic.com>

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