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# The 7 Essential Acting Exercises FOR FINDING YOUR OWN INNER ACTOR

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## INTRODUCTION

## THE 7 ESSENTIAL EXERCISES

1: Understand Your Motivation

2: Watch Movies...for Study!

3: Dissect a Moment and a Discover the Motive

4: Know the Greats

5: Never Stop Taking Notes

6: Remove Your Masks

7: Find a Mentor or Teacher

## \*\*\* BONUS EXERCISE \*\*\*

What's Your Favorite Cup?

## NEXT STEPS

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“Acting is living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.”

- Sanford Meisner

## INTRODUCTION

Some 40 or so years ago, I left my humble hometown in Shreveport, Louisiana, without any hint of a plan or clear agenda, heading for Los Angeles with only one unstoppable goal: to become an actress.

I couldn't recommend that move to anyone today. It was whimsical, challenging, and lacked much of the decision-making most people must go through to arrive at a structure for their lives that works for them.

But I've lived my life defying structure. And, despite my poor planning, I was incredibly lucky to run into someone only a few hours after arriving who helped me get on my feet and kickstart my decades-long career in a field so many had told me was impossible for me to get into.

Things are different today. For one thing, I'm not sure we're as apt to follow our dreams. Little is left to the excitement of mystery anymore: if you want to know about something, you can just look it up on YouTube and presume to have “experienced” it.

When it comes to filmmaking or television, the media also gives a truly unfair advantage to the next “big ticket superstar” who's willing to do whatever it takes (or in many cases, simply show more cleavage).

But that doesn't mean there isn't still a place for those who really care about the art of acting, those who believe in it as a discipline and as a way of life.

For those of you who are considering this as a potential endeavor--whether as a career or a time-intensive hobby--I'm compelled to offer a simple list of seven exercises that will help you (1) decide if this art form is right for you, and (2) immediately begin exploring and experiencing the very practices that the great actors of our times have used to hone their skills in portraying characters we come to love or loath in all their authenticity.

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Now, some of the things I teach will work for you and some may not. Acting is a process of discovering what does and doesn't work for you as an individual. By simply downloading these exercises, I suspect you already see the world a little bit differently, and it is my desire to help you broaden those horizons even more. And we will have fun doing it together.

## THE 7 ESSENTIAL EXERCISES

### 1: Understand Your Motivation

Understand what you're in it for: is it just for money? Is it for fame? Ask yourself, what is my motivation in this? If it's unclear, get clear.

If you find your primary motivation in getting into acting to be one of money or celebrity, the means of getting you there are going to be quite different than being truly interested in film (or theatre) for film's sake or having a deep appreciation for the art form that is acting.

To be honest, the only way I know to get really clear about what matters to you when it comes to film or acting is to take a little time to get more familiar with what it takes to make a film or to create a character.

Below are a couple of books that I highly recommend reading and reflecting on over that will open up the real world beyond what the camera and audience see.

### Recommended Reading

- [Building a Character](#) by Constantin Stanislavski (Kindle version [here](#))
- [On Directing](#) by Elia Kazan (Kindle version [here](#))
- [Acting Without Agony](#) by Don Richardson (also available for rent)
- Any book by a director whose work you enjoy

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## 2: Watch Movies...for Study!

Once you have gotten clear on your motive and it is based on a desire to dive into the world of acting because of a genuine interest in the work, it's important that you begin to study it.

But this isn't your normal brand of studying! While books offer important insights, you can't possibly get everything you need for becoming an actor from books. If you want to be a part of film, you need to study acting. You need to look at what it takes to get there as a character. You need to study film itself!

Come up with a list of a few films that really took your breath away and give them a watch. Even if you have seen the film, watch it again. The first time you watch, simply enjoy the journey. The second time you watch it, your mission is to find the moment in which a character's life changes and take note of the end result or resolution of that change.

Remember before or after watching the film to *look it up!* (No excuses: everything's on Google and Wikipedia today.) Learn the behind-the-scenes facts to how these incredible actors pulled off what they did to build a character or reveal a motive.

Here's a short list of some excellent films that emphasize different categories of skill that an actor is likely to encounter in their career and that I recommend all my students watch.

(So you know, these are links to online rentals, wherever available, that rarely charge over \$3 per film. You pay nothing extra when you use these, but each affords me a small commission that allows me to offer as much as I do free of cost. That said, you can also likely find most of these at your local library or on Netflix.)

### Recommended Watching

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*For building sensory awareness...*

- [The Scent of a Woman](#)
- [Wait Until Dark](#)

*For environment and character development...*

- [Midnight Cowboy](#)
- [Winter's Bone](#)

*For physical exertion and endurance...*

- [The Revenant](#)
- [Million Dollar Baby](#)
- [127 Hours](#)
- [Shine](#)

*For complex plot and emotion...*

- [The Eye of the Needle](#)

*For an appreciation of the classics...*

- [To Kill A Mockingbird](#)
- [A Place In the Sun](#)

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### 3: Dissect a Moment and a Discover the Motive

If all you do is watch and study film through movies alone, you're more likely to develop a strong career as a film critic than an actor. In order to become the latter, you must take the next step beyond watching and *do* it.

To help new acting students get started in penetrating the emotional realm that comprises the world and reason of all character development, I suggest this exercise.

Think of a moment in your life that had a great effect on you--a fight you witnessed, an accident, the death of someone you loved, a betrayal, an accomplishment, etc. It can be a "wow!" moment, a painful, joyous, embarrassing, infuriating, proud, extremely difficult moment, or a moment of revelation.

Write it out as though you are telling it to your best friend or someone who cares about you. Decide to whom you are talking, why are you telling them, what you hope to accomplish by telling them, and what you imagined the result to be by telling them.

Make sure this is a moment that has a great influence on your life. (Hint: if you're having to think hard about it, it probably wasn't as impactful in your life as something that more intuitively arrives to your memory.)

Once you've captured that moment and "told" it in detail, attempt to decipher what the purpose of it happening to you was. For example, if it was an argument, ask what was important in what you or the other person said. What end were you trying to achieve? What result did you actually get?

Finally, ask yourself, how does this important moment in memory affect your life today? (Do you avoid the elevator and take the stairs? Do you never enter a dark room? Do you cringe when someone greets you a certain way?) How has it manifested in your life over time?

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It's like the director Werner Herzog said: when working with actors, it's all about *relationship*. Why are you drawn into certain relationships? You need something -- what is it you're looking for? Why is it you react a certain way to certain things and people?

Dissecting a moment in your past and discovering your motive to it, not once, but often, offers you the opportunity to increase your emotional awareness and natural response to events and people--it allows you to *play* (as this discipline was once called).

As an actor, to be able to play and be good, you must be able to step into the skin of other people, other characters. And to do this, you must first understand and become comfortable in your own skin. The great actors do this and make us believe they have indeed become the people they portray on film or stage.

#### **4: Know the Greats**

Practically everyone knows who Bradley Cooper, Cate Blanchett, or Kevin Spacey are. While each of these actors are wonderful in their own right, few people (except actors themselves) question who many of the original greats were, those who are directly or indirectly responsible for the skill and talent of so many who have followed.

Who *were* people like Uta Hagen, Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler (all three my own teachers)? What about Lee Strasberg or Stanislavski? All of these and more contributed in ways we can only start to imagine to the art of acting, and I cannot accept any aspiring student's claim to be an actor who has not given sufficient weight (whether they agree with their methods or not) to these people and their work.

Ms. Stella Adler, for instance, is only one of the masters I have been blessed to have studied with at an earlier time. Yet, while none of these highly respected teachers are alive today, I learned different techniques from each of them on the path to becoming an actor.



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It's therefore required of you to know the people, the names and faces, who comprise the history and this world of acting. This doesn't just apply to the greats, but to anyone at all you see or notice in your film watching who attracts your attention or perhaps even takes your breath away to watch.

Of course, the knowledge that you'll harvest from this alone won't come overnight, but little by little over time. And as you come to know of them, you must decide for yourself what you will incorporate into your repertoire when it comes time to put your acting to the test.

In the context of these people and this art, understand what it means for your body and mind to be an "instrument". How do you work? How do you sound and behave in your natural state? What happens when you get bent out of shape, so to speak? How do you hold yourself, take care of yourself?

Put most simply, if there is the name of an actor, actress, painter, playwright, person, place or anything at all that has a reputation or place in the acting world that you do not know, be proactive: look them up.

### **Recommended Reading**

- [Respect for Acting](#) by Uta Hagen (Kindle version [here](#))
- [The Art of Acting](#) by Stella Adler (Kindle version [here](#))
- [On Acting](#) by Sanford Meisner (Kindle version [here](#))

### **Recommended Watching**

- [Uta Hagen's Acting Class](#) (DVD)
- [Sanford Meisner Master Class](#) (DVD)

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## **5: Never Stop Taking Notes**

Always be prepared to take notes. Period. Don't rely on the accounts others give for a character description or a stereotype. Your own experience will always trump it.

Case in point. I was sitting somewhere in a coffee shop, and two guys came in. The way they dressed was what I called "yuppie", my instant reaction to them was repulsion. Studying them more closely, I could see they were wearing loafers without socks, over-styled hair, upturned lapels, banded sunglasses that fit tight to their heads. In my mind, they were something that had stepped straight out of an outdated GQ mag, and it disgusted me.

Fortunately, as a studying actress, I did more than just impulsively react as I did. I asked myself the right questions to deeper understanding. Where did that disgust come from? I knew, somebody somewhere (maybe even someone who dismissed me once long ago) imprinted the image I had of the way these two men dressed in tight association in my mind.

That emotion, and more importantly my awareness of it, was perfect material for character-building! I instantly took out a pad of paper and wrote it down. It fleshed out for me a great description of a character, filling in the emotional world, etc.

Whether it's documenting something an amazing actor or teacher said for later review, or noting some interesting aspect of your emotional life that you've never been aware of before--write it down! You never know what will come into play later when you need it most.

## **6: Remove Your Masks**

Perhaps the hardest thing for a new student to acting isn't the books or the self

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reflection, it's learning how to be vulnerable. However, this is *the* most crucial aspect between good and mediocre in an actor's world.

Vulnerability means stripping down to what is just *you*. Not the you-at-work. Not the you-the-wife or -husband or -parent. Not you-the-likeable-and-attractive-and-funny-person your friends may even know you by. It's simply only *you*.

The challenge to getting to this bare-bones version of yourself lies in how simple it is. It isn't adding anything, it isn't even really learning a new skill. It's more often for people an *unlearning* of the many "add-ons"--social habits, mannerisms, ways we portray ourselves--that we so regularly rely on to be liked or accepted by others.

Think of this as finding your baseline, the you that "wears" nothing for the sake of others, that is void of anything "extraneous", anything beyond what's honestly and simply just your core individuality.

There are a number of different ways to get there. One is to meditate and spend time in introspection, shedding the light of awareness on what's you and what's "extra".

Another is to engage in unfamiliar (and therefore often uncomfortable!) situations, conversations, and experiences. Becoming aware of your comfort zone will often help you delineate where your automatic responses are and make it that much easier to strip them away when it comes time to play someone (or something) that might react in a very different way than you do to the same stimulus.

In [my classes](#), I make it a requirement that my students come dressed comfortably (no skirts, suits, anything flashy at all) and with no make-up. If you can't drop your social exterior in the safe space of an acting workshop, you will have a terribly challenging time revealing to an audience some aspect of pain or true joy in yourself that is responsible for them falling in love with you (or at the very least, actually getting their attention).

In class, we're not coming as a character. As actors we learn how to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, at first in front of other actors, and over time, in front of a camera or audience. This means saying goodbye (at least for a moment) to the parts of ourselves we would *hope* to be rather than ground ourselves in who we *are*, whether they meet our

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expectations or not.

## **7: Find a Mentor or Teacher**

Finally, the “exercise” that trumps all others. You *must* find a mentor if you wish to become a serious (that is, seriously authentic) actor.

Acting may appear at first to some of us to be human beings (many with little training these days) running around on screen just “being funny” or “pretending to be sad”. But don’t confuse the lack of “equipment” necessary for acting with any lack of tools or skill needed to do it well--or of the teaching required from someone who can help you get there.

I studied with several very different teachers in my beginning years. There was a whole series of actors from those schools, but the particular teachers I became student to (namely, Stella Adler, Uta Hagen, and Sanford Meisner) were different.

I wanted to become the next Meryl Streep, the cream of the crop. The feelings I needed (and many of us ignore most of our lives) were there, but I had to learn how to get back to them to allow others to see them.

When I finally got the chance to go to New York to study with these amazing teachers, it was the key to opening the door for me. I had one-on-ones with Uta Hagen, then sat in on Meisner’s classes. I was blown away by Stella Adler’s demeanor, polar opposite to what I had imagined up to seeing and studying with her in person. And the tools and the techniques I learned from them all allowed me to play a moment (just like the exercise above) and say “this is it”.

You must learn about your teacher. Find someone who fits what you want to learn, the results that matter to you. Understand the path they took, what brought them to where they are.

The teachers I had are not alive anymore. You have to find for yourself someone who helps you find those tools so that you too can find your instrument. The good thing is,

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thanks to advances in technology like the internet, this is now easier than ever to do. You can even start a class, decide if it's for you, and not feel pressured to finish it.

My online course, [The Inner Actor](#), is an example opportunity to get your feet wet, explore the real world of acting outside of the status quo humdrum that makes for regular tabloid headlines. You will get an chance to really experience *acting* (provided you do your homework and work with a group near you, which we will connect you with in this program).

However, choosing a teacher means a serious step-up in dedication to your learning curve. It means full commitment. If you are ready, you must choose someone. Once you do, don't stop until you've learned all you believe is humanly possible to glean from them (and then some). Their input will put you years ahead of those who think that they can go the path alone.

### **\*\*\* BONUS EXERCISE \*\*\***

#### **What's Your Favorite Cup?**

Yes, I know, I told you *seven* exercises. But, as I've said, the more you continue to open yourself to the world around you, the more you learn. And, as a teacher, the more you learn, the more you teach.

So I couldn't help throwing in this last exercise for you that I created to help my students explore in yet another way the intricacies and nuances of experience that underlie truly great acting.

The question is simple. Do you have a favorite cup?

Myself, I have one specific cup for coffee and one for hot tea. There's an emotional element that each cup triggers in me, and it's not just the cup itself but what's *in* the cup that changes my preferences. (For similar reasons, I also have a favorite spoon and a favorite fork. But that's a whole other deal.)

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Recognizing your particular preferences will reveal something to you about yourself that you likely weren't aware of. Recognizing and acknowledging my cup preference, I learned that for me either cup was (and still is) a physical manifestation of something I've lost before (as well as the moments when I lost it)--namely, security in my life. Holding something hot or warm, and (importantly) in one of these particular cups, represents for me the holding onto that sense of security I can now appreciate so many years later. It gives me a sense of being grounded.

In your work as an actor, understanding *props* in this way, and how to work with them in a natural way, is really just a matter of understanding life as it actually happens for you.

Here's an example. In a scene where I had to commit suicide by pills, and the director called, "Cut! *What* are you doing?"

I took a moment to analyze my actions. I had to study the way I was swallowing pills, that I realized included the fear I had of them getting stuck in my throat. For that reason, my order was different from the norm. Usually it's pill then water, right? For me it was water and then pill.

But the director is the director. I had to get over my fear of choking. So what happened?

I was still terrified that I was going to choke on those godforsaken pills. But in the end, that fear translated for the audience to the fear of taking my life, the tension of making that choice, the desperate wonder if someone will come in and rescue me at the last moment.

There's almost nothing we do, choices we make, that doesn't have an emotional association with it. They are *all around you*. Use them.

## **NEXT STEPS...**

Having studied with Stella Adler, who stressed theatre technique, Uta Hagen, who emphasized scene work, and Sandy Meisner, who stressed improv and sense memory, I have found that there was a common ground they all believed and taught to others.

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For starters, It's important to understand that to find a character in one's self requires removing the masks one wears to be accepted socially. To do so, an actor must first find and develop a full sense of their own identity. This requires recognizing and knowing personal needs, feelings, and behaviors. And then one must know how to apply them to any given situation in their work as an actor.

All three teachers believed that an actor of any level needs a safe place, a place of positive support and energy, where they can explore, and even fail, without fear of being criticized, censored, or critiqued by their peers. It should be a space of discovery.

That's why I created [an introductory class](#) that gives potential actors more lessons and exercises (and helpful stories!) to become acquainted with the vast and wonderful world of acting before taking anything "too serious". My focus is on exercises that support each individual actor (or actor-to-be) in discovering and developing a sense of self and how to apply that to a character in a real film or play.

What's even better, as someone signing up now, you will receive an *exclusive discount* to the course! (Please go to my website below to learn more.)

See, in my day, you were either all in or you could forget it. You either moved to New York or L.A. with the motive of becoming a full-time actor or actress, or you heeded the negative advice of others to get your head out of the clouds and stop dreaming.

Today, I believe it's important that *every* human being--whether you're a mother, a businessman, or a retired senior in the mood for exploration--have the chance to delve into the rich world of filmmaking and theatre. And as your teacher, my goal will be to help you uncover that richness for you to decide *before* you hit the big time: is this really for me?

If you've read this far, my guess is that, like me, you are curious (perhaps insatiably so) to experience the thrills and mysteries of the psyche in this ancient art form that nonetheless is as relevant today as it was thousands of years before.

I hope you'll consider exploring it with me, together.

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For more information on “An Introduction to the Inner Actor”, please visit  
<http://www.karencarlson.org/inner-actor>.