

SACRAMENTO COMEDY SPOT

HELIX IMPROV FORM

Updated July 12, 2022

HELIX INTRODUCTION

Helix is a long-form improv structure in three beats, featuring characters and physicality, with an emphasis on strongly improvised scenes. Helix provides structure, but also allows for open, creative play, so it is good for performers who are still developing skills while also being accessible to audiences. The Helix was created by Comedy Spot founder Brian Crall, based on two decades of experience teaching and performing, student and performer feedback, and by watching thousands of improv shows. The first Helix teams performed on July 7, 2021 at Sacramento Comedy Spot. Helix is perfect for improv teams of 6-8 people. The skills needed to be successful when performing a Helix are taught as part of the Comedy Spot's core curriculum ([Improv 101-301](#)).

Each beat of the Helix gets progressively shorter in duration. The first beat is usually approximately 12-15 minutes long. The second beat is approximately 10 minutes, and the third beat is about 5 minutes long. So a typical Helix show is about 25-30 minutes long.

FIRST BEAT (15 minutes)

The first beat introduces the audience to the format of creating scenes inspired by true stories AND introduces the audience to the performers in the show. Therefore, everyone in the cast should be in one of the scenes in the first beat (3-4 scenes). Additionally, the first beat of the show should be simple and feature the easiest patterns inspired by the true stories. The audience should say to themselves, "Oh, I see how this works."

A Helix starts with a one-word suggestion from the audience. The team repeats the one word suggestion in unison and then claps.

Two Helix team members tell a true story from their past, inspired by the one-word suggestion.

After each story, team members should try to find an opportunity to banter with the storyteller. Banter can be riffing on the "funny" of the story, asking follow-up questions, or sharing observations about the story. Follow up questions should be about the story that was just told- dive deeper into the story. Observations can be how a cast member feels about the story. Riffing is just brainstorming on how best to turn the funny of the story into a pattern for a scene. Talk to the audience during banter, not to each other, even though you are talking to each other.

Performers should use word association to find stories that have completely different subjects. The quick banter session is another opportunity to gather ideas for scenes. Team members should clap at the end of banter session or after the story, if team members can not find an opportunity to banter.

After both stories, Helix team members create scenes with patterns inspired by the true stories and banter.

The Helix team will move to the second beat of the show **when all of the team members have performed in one, two-person, scene.** After the final edit in the first beat, a team member will step forward and start to tell another true story to start the second beat.

SECOND BEAT (10 minutes)

The second beat starts with a Helix team member telling a story inspired by one of the scenes in the first beat, or from the one-word suggestion at the beginning of the show. Again, the true story must have a subject that is DIFFERENT than the stories in the first beat. Team members should banter after this story as well, but the banter session should be shorter than in the first beat.

The second beat is a mixture of new scenes inspired by the second-beat story, unused ideas from the first beat, and callbacks from successful scenes in the first beat. At least one new scene should immediately follow the second-beat story.

The second beat of the Helix should be more frenetic than the first, and in addition to new scenes the second beat can feature **callbacks and group scenes** and **more advanced improv skills.**

When doing a callback, be sure to clearly re-establish the pattern of the scene and start closer to crazy town.

If the team has exhausted all of their ideas, performers should initiate organic scenes, or one of the cast members might tell the audience an abbreviated true story inspired by the suggestion or something unusual that has happened up to that point in the show. The story **MUST** be energetic, 30-40 seconds long, and have a new subject from all the other stories in the show. There will **NOT** be a banter session after this story. The first scene after this story must be a brand new scene. This is completely optional if you feel you are running out of ideas or you are not feeling confident in creating something organically, and you are not yet in the third beat of the show.

The Helix team will move to the third beat of the show when they receive a red light at 20ish minutes.

THIRD BEAT (5 minutes)

The third beat is the shortest and most energetic beat of the show. The 20 minute light is an indication that you should start wrapping up the show. Callback your best scenes and start close to crazy town. Even though scenes are shorter, Helix members should still focus on creating quality scenes and characters.

The third beat features **callbacks** from the first and second beats AND characters, themes, locations, or patterns that may **blend with other scenes.**

Drive toward the end of your show, and keep the momentum up so you end on a high note.

A Helix ends with a blackout determined by a coach or designated tech. The coach or tech will end the show after a hit in a scene that is heightened to crazy town. Helix shows should not go longer than 30 minutes.

Modifications

The fun part of any form is modifying it to highlight your group's strengths. True stories can be eliminated and replaced with a different opening, scenes can be organic, casts can be smaller or larger, or whatever makes your improv group perform at its best. Have fun! Melt faces! And let us know if you use the #HelixImprov @saccomedyspot

Skills Needed

True Stories, Abbreviated Stories, A to C, Pattern, Scene Work, Characters, Callbacks, Group Scenes, Editing, Organic Scenes

Update Log

5/2/22 - Improved explanation of banter. Clarification that the short story in the 2nd Beat of the show is optional, and only used when teams are looking for more inspiration for scenes.

7/12/22 - Edit to make certain points more clear.