



NATALIE PORTMAN
TEACHES ACTING

MASTERCLASS

MEET YOUR NEW INSTRUCTOR

Natalie Portman is an acclaimed actor, director, writer, producer, and activist. She received an Academy Award in the Best Actress category for her performance in Darren Aronofsky's film *Black Swan*, and nominations for her performances in Mike Nichols's film *Closer* and Pablo Larraín's *Jackie*. She has also been honored with Golden Globe Awards, a Screen Actors Guild Award, Critics Choice Awards, and a BAFTA Award.

On screen, Natalie has starred in over 40 films. She made her debut in Luc Besson's 1994 film, *Léon: The Professional*, and went on to star in films such as *Heat*, *Anywhere But Here* (Golden Globe nomination), *Cold Mountain*, *Garden State*, *Closer* (Academy Award nomination and Golden Globe Award), *V for Vendetta*, *Beautiful Girls*, *The Other Boleyn Girl*, *Goya's Ghosts*, *Black Swan*, *Thor* and its sequel, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Jackie*, *Knight of Cups*, *Jane Got a Gun*, and *Song to Song*. Additionally, she starred in George Lucas's *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace*, *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, and *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*. The prequel trilogy to the wildly popular *Star Wars* trilogy of the 1970s and '80s rank among the top-grossing films ever produced worldwide. She has recently completed work on a few films including Xavier Dolan's next film, *The Life and Death of John F. Donovan*, and Brady Corbet's *Vox Lux*. In 2018, Portman starred in Alex Garland's highly anticipated second feature as a director, the sci-fi thriller *Annihilation*, and began filming Noah Hawley's *Lucy in the Sky*, a story of an astronaut and her return to Earth after a life-changing mission.

On stage, Natalie starred in Mike Nichol's New York Shakespeare Festival production of *The Seagull*, opposite Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, and Philip Seymour Hoffman; as well as in James Lapine's Broadway production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Natalie has also taken on a variety of roles behind the lens. She wrote, directed, and starred in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, which

made its world premiere at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival and its North American premiere at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival. The story, based on the autobiographical novel by Amos Oz, revolves around Oz's childhood in Jerusalem in the period following the end of the British Mandate for Palestine and the early years of the State of Israel, in addition to his teenage years on a kibbutz. Natalie's credits also include *Eve*, which she wrote and directed. The short film debuted at the 2008 Venice Film Festival and stars Lauren Bacall, Ben Gazzara, and Olivia Thirlby. She also wrote and directed a short film for *New York, I Love You* about a day in the life of a father and daughter spent in Central Park.

Natalie served as an executive producer on *The Seventh Fire* and executive produced and narrated the upcoming documentary *Eating Animals*, which examines factory farming and is based on Jonathan Safran Foer's book of the same name.

In addition to her film work, Natalie also devotes her time to several humanitarian causes. She became the first Ambassador of Hope for FINCA, an international village banking microfinance program providing small loans and savings programs to the world's poorest families so they may create their own jobs, raise household incomes, and improve their standard of living thereby reducing poverty worldwide.

As an Ambassador of WE, Portman lends her time to the organization that empowers youth by removing barriers that prevent them from being active local and global citizens. Through the organization and the "Power of a Girl Project," she also helped support and fund the opening of the Kisaruni All-Girls Secondary School in Kenya.

A Harvard graduate with a degree in psychology, Natalie has also studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

“

Acting is unlike other arts because you're not sitting alone painting in a room, you're not playing an instrument by yourself. You are working with an orchestra.

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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER REVIEW

The importance of finding your personal process through practice and play is quintessential for an actor. Natalie was not formally educated in acting; rather, she developed her personal technique through her work and collaboration with other artists. With Natalie, you will explore the ways in which you can work and grow independently as an artist so that you can show up in the audition room or on set prepared to be the best collaborator possible.

ASSIGNMENT

Dedicate a notebook to this MasterClass. Use it to jot down thoughts you may have as you are watching the class and doing the assignments and exercises. Additionally, having a journal is a great tool as you discover new techniques and processes. Keep track of what works and what doesn't as you begin to hone a practice that is specific to you as an actor.

Film footage from *Closer* and *Léon: The Professional* courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

CHAPTER TWO
GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CHARACTER

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Your role as actor is to try and understand your character and what your character goes through and what your character is within the film as a whole. Try to understand from the director what the tone is, what the style is as best as possible so that you can provide them with raw material that they can use when they're cooking the movie.

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GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CHARACTER

SUBCHAPTERS

- Develop a Timeline for Your Character
- Map Relationships With Others
- Find the Details That Make Your Character Unique
- Don't Judge Your Character

CHAPTER REVIEW

As an actor, it is your job to develop an intimate understanding of your character. Character maps are a tool that Natalie uses to help guide her through her process of discovery and learning. When you create the map, you are starting a sketch of the character and then bringing that sketch to life by filling it in with all the detail you possibly can. The more specific you can be, the better.

The first step is to create a chronological list of the events in the movie, keeping in mind that scripts are sometimes written out of order, so that you have a solid understanding of when things happen. Then, within this timeline, find and name the moments when shifts occur for the character. These change points are the smaller steps the character takes to get to the overarching change they go through. For example, “this is the scene where she finds her voice for the first time” and “this is the scene where she rejects her parents for the first time” reveal big changes for the character—a shift from girl to woman. Keep in mind that for this kind of work, you should only reference the scenes that your character is in, because they don't know what's happening outside themselves. This analysis of the text will act as a roadmap of the character's life within the script and will give you a better understanding of the script as you begin to break it down.

Next, you'll want to better your understanding of your character's psychology and their relationships within the film. These are the four questions that Natalie asks: How does the character see

themselves? How do other people see the character? How does the character think other people see them? How does the character want to be seen by them? After you've analyzed these inquiries, you can begin to delve into specific relationships your character has in the film. It's helpful to go through and name all the relationships your character has. Within these relationships, think about what the dynamic is and how differently the character acts in each one. For example, you might act differently around your mother than you act around your significant other. Dig into all of these questions with as much specificity as you can as you continue to build your version of the character.

To build a believable and real character, highlight your character's unique personality points while withholding any judgement that you may feel about their choices. For example, if you're playing a villain, you have to remember that the character isn't necessarily aware that their behavior is bad and that they likely believe their behavior is justified. As an actor, your job is to look for ways to justify the character's actions, even though you might not agree with them.

LEARN MORE

For more information about how to analyze your character's journey through a script, read [this article](#) about the process of "scoring your script." Pay special attention to the sections on objectives, super-objectives, and tactics in order to deepen your understanding of what Natalie speaks about in regard to character changes.

ASSIGNMENTS

Every new role begins with character work. Use the printable worksheets on the following pages to dive into deep character analysis.

If you're currently working on a role, use these sheets on the following pages to deepen your understanding of it. If you're not currently working on a role, choose a script that inspires you and has a meaty role that you're drawn to. Perhaps it's a character it you've always wanted to play or one you couldn't possibly imagine yourself playing but want to explore.

Pick one scene from the script that includes the character you chose. Go for a longer scene that's at least two or more pages and memorize your lines. (For advice on memorization, see Chapter 10: Performing on Camera.)

To find a screenplay for free online, check out [IMSDB](#), [Script-O-Rama](#), and [Simply Scripts](#).

CREATE A TIMELINE

1. Plot each scene that your character is in on a chronological timeline. Many scripts aren't written sequentially, so you may have to piece together the chronology. (Remember: only plot the scenes that pertain to your character; from their perspective, they don't know anything else that happens in the script.)

2. On the timeline below, highlight why these are the most important events for your character and note how they act or react in these moments, i.e., "This is the scene where she finds her voice."



BEGINNING

END

TIME SPAN (hours, days, months, etc.)

3. Ask yourself: What is the biggest change your character goes through in the script? (Keep in mind that your character won't always change, but it's something to examine and be aware of either way. If they don't change, label the moments in the script where they are being pushed to change but choose not to. Ask yourself why they don't change in those moments and what information that gives you about them.)

CHARACTER MAPPING 2

PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Delve into your character's layers of perception, using these questions as a guide.

HOW DOES THE CHARACTER SEE THEMSELVES?

HOW DO OTHER PEOPLE IN THE SCRIPT ACTUALLY SEE THE CHARACTER?

HOW DOES MY CHARACTER THINK OTHER PEOPLE SEE THEM?

HOW DOES MY CHARACTER WANT TO BE SEEN BY OTHERS?

CHAPTER THREE
DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER THROUGH RESEARCH

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Paint from life. You don't want to be doing a version of a character you saw in a movie... You're not making a movie influenced by other movies. You're making a movie influenced by life.

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DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER THROUGH RESEARCH

SUBCHAPTERS

- Draw Your Character From Real Life
- Use Documentaries to Inform Your Character
- Use YouTube as a Resource
- Learn the Historical Context for Your Character
- Invent What You Don't Know
- Research Ahead of Time

CHAPTER REVIEW

For Natalie, character research comes in many forms. The first is, simply, observation. She encourages you to create a character that is influenced by real people in your life. Take note of behaviors that you observe in your personal relationships and apply them to your characters, regardless of what era in time they live in. If it's helpful, you can think about channeling a specific person's energy into a character.

Documentaries are also a great tool to help inform character. When she was preparing for her role as a contemporary pop star in the film *Vox Lux*, Natalie watched a plethora of documentaries about pop stars and took little bits of behavior from each one.

Natalie also refers to videos on YouTube for research. She finds the online repository of user-generated content to be a fantastic resource for learning about accents, behaviors, and certain skills you might need for a film. Most recently, while preparing to play an astronaut who has returned to earth after a stint in space, Natalie used Commander Chris Hadfield's videos of his day-to-day activities on the International Space Station as references. By familiarizing herself with what it might be like to live as an astronaut, she was able to then envision what it would be like to reacclimate to life at home.

When playing a historical figure, there is usually a great deal of research available to you. Depending on the time period, audio and video footage of the character is a good place to start. First-hand

accounts of your character’s life will give you a window into their personal experience of historical events—which may be very different from the retrospective view you’ll encounter in history books. When audio and video sources aren’t available, look for first-person accounts of what their day-to-day life would’ve been like.

For her role in *Jane Got a Gun*, Natalie read the diaries of Western women. For her role as Anne Boleyn, she read historical accounts of what Anne’s life was like, including details on her courtship with King Henry VIII. These types of detailed records can provide insight into the cultural expectations of the time period.

In your process of developing your character, lean on the facts that you’ve discovered, but feel free to get creative. When Natalie is fleshing out the final details of a character, especially those with a public persona, she likes to think about what they were like alone. For this, she uses her research as a framework, but she fills in the details using her imagination.

Lastly, Natalie stresses the importance of doing all of your work well in advance of shooting. The research you’ve done should be in your bones and settled in your body. This way, the character has a way to live and breathe in you even before you start saying your lines.

LEARN MORE

For more information and advice on developing a good research process, read [this overview on Spacious Acting](#) and this [roundtable discussion from *American Theatre*](#).

ASSIGNMENT

What kind of research needs to go into your next role? Dig into the various types of media that Natalie discusses: documentaries, YouTube videos, diaries, and any other sources that are helpful to you. Some questions to ask yourself might include:

- What is the time period?
- What were the current events at the time?
- How did people dress? How would this inform your character’s posturing/physicality?
- How does your character act around others in public versus private?

Natalie talks about creating characters that are influenced by people you know. Try applying this concept to the character in the script you’ve chosen to work on. Write down any similarities your character might have to someone you know in your notebook. Is there a certain energy that this person has that you identify with or could channel in the character? Do they exhibit any behaviors you can apply to your character? Make a list of these behaviors and keep it with your worksheet as an addendum to your character work.

CHAPTER FOUR
DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER'S PHYSICALITY

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The way you move with your body is such a big part of expressing the character's personality—expressing their emotion and expressing the way they enter the world.

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DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER'S PHYSICALITY

SUBCHAPTERS

- Root Your Character's Physicality in Emotion
- Use Your Appearance to Connect to Your Character
- Let Your Character's Psychology Inform Your Movement
- Let Costume Inform Your Character's Movement
- Play With Movement in Relation to the Camera and Other Actors
- Costume Informing Character: *Jackie*
- Get Creative in the In-Between Moments

CHAPTER REVIEW

Finding the physicality within a role is very much a part of Natalie's process. Sometimes the physicality will be in the given circumstances of the character (i.e. if they are a ballet dancer); but if it's not, Natalie advises you to look for something physical to help further your understanding of them and how they operate in the world. This can be as simple as incorporating a type of exercise that you feel would be aligned with your character's personality, like a jogging routine or traditional Ashtanga yoga.

As an actor, you must be able to embody the character completely so that you're creating a believable person. Let your character's emotion or mood inform your posture and movement within your scenes. Your walk may be different depending on what you're trying to do in that scene and how you want to be perceived by the other characters in the scene.

Wardrobe and makeup can help you connect with your character in a deeper way. Clothing and shoes will affect your posture, your movement, and even how you breathe (think: corsets). Let these details help fill out your character sketch as you delve deeper into your character development. Don't be afraid to suggest or ask for something if you think it will give you a new edge or specificity.

In *Vox Lux*, Natalie chose to have big nails because it felt appropriate for the character. The nails changed the way that she used her hands and created a new and interesting physicality for her.

LEARN MORE

[This article](#) is a great reference to get you thinking about character physicality. Write down your answers to each of these questions in your notebook as you begin to flesh out ideas for your character's physicality.

ASSIGNMENT

After answering the above questions, go through the script and think about how your character moves and what their posture is like in each scene. Is it the same throughout or does it change at all? Record your discoveries in your notebook.

Then, play around with your newly discovered physicalities. Move around your space freely so that you can really feel them in your body. Have a partner come read with you after your exploration and scale back the exaggeration as you have them read with you. How does the newfound physicality affect you? Record any insights in your notebook.

Lastly, change your look. Put on lipstick, pants, a dress, a certain pair of shoes that the character might wear. Read the scene again. Did you notice a difference in how you read? Write down what felt different for you.

CHAPTER FIVE
SCENE STUDIES: PHYSICAL GESTURE

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What are the gestures that you can
add to moments to make them a little
juicier, a little bit more fun to watch,
and a little bit more eccentric?

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SCENE STUDIES: PHYSICAL GESTURE

SUBCHAPTERS

- Use Real Life Accidents:
A Woman Under the Influence
- Find Interesting Gestures for the In-Between Moments:
The Deer Hunter
- Try the Unexpected:
Before the Devil Knows You're Dead

CHAPTER REVIEW

Natalie reviews three film scenes in which great actors use movement to reveal character in an unexpected way. In *A Woman Under the Influence*, Gena Rowlands plays a woman struggling with alcoholism. As she scrambles around outside getting her children ready to leave the house, she loses her slipper, likely by accident. In this moment, she chose to embrace the unexpected, because she was so grounded in her character. The more you are able to go with the flow as you're acting, the better your chances are of making new discoveries about your character.

Making specific physical choices within your actions is another way to highlight a character's emotion in a scene. Sometimes we react to situations in life unexpectedly, and different emotions manifest in different ways in different people. You can see this in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* with Philip Seymour Hoffman when he acts slowly and methodically as he destroys his apartment, instead of acting violently as the audience might expect.

Natalie talks about Meryl Streep's use of physical gesture in *The Deer Hunter* to highlight her character. In a moment that was more about Robert De Niro's character, she took the time to think about what her character would be doing. Even though it was very much an in-between moment in the film, she made the specific choice to stop and fix her hair. Be specific with your choices no matter how small or short the moment.

ASSIGNMENT

Pick one of these films to watch, and focus on the highlighted character: either Gena Rowlands, Philip Seymour Hoffman, or Meryl Streep. Watch how they use movement, behavior, and gesture throughout the film. What physical things do the actors do that might not have been written into the script? What choices would you make differently if you were playing that role? What in particular about the way they use these elements sticks out to you? Write down specific moments that stand out for you to inspire your own choices when working on a role. Also note if there's anything that surprises you about their choices, and think about why those choices worked.

Film Footage from *The Deer Hunter* used with permission from StudioCanal.

CHAPTER SIX
CASE STUDY: BLACK SWAN

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Black Swan, of course, is the clearest in terms of my relationship to physical transformation. A ballet dancer has such a specific body and posture and way of walking.

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CASE STUDY: *BLACK SWAN*

SUBCHAPTERS

- Accept the Constraints of Your Body
- Communicate Your Limits to Avoid Injury
- Relate the Physical to the Emotional State

CHAPTER REVIEW

In *Black Swan*, Natalie plays the part of Nina, a young ballet dancer who has who sides, the white swan and the black swan. The white swan is concerned with pleasing others, like a young girl under her mother's tight rule. The black swan is driven by her own desires and pleasing herself. The two have different voices and physicalities.

Ballet has a very specific posturing and movement. Natalie worked with her trainer for a year prior to shooting, during which time she gleaned insight into her character's world and day-to-day life. Her trainer also served as a coach to let her know when to warm up and when to stop. No matter what level you're at in your professional career, it's important to be in dialogue with the director about not going too far in very physical roles. Know your stopping point and take care of yourself.

For Natalie, developing physicality is an extremely important tool, because it allows her to maximize her character's specificity. When working on an extremely physical role like Nina, Natalie discovered that the ritual of her dance training informed the character's mindset. For example, sewing ribbons on the pointe shoes, lacing up the shoes, and doing the same warm up day after day were all rituals that aligned with Nina's obsessiveness. She found an obsessive-compulsive behavior in the character through these repetitive actions. For Nina, if these things could be done perfectly, then she would be one step closer to attaining her goal of absolute perfection.

LEARN MORE

Watch *Black Swan*. Pay close attention to the moment where you first notice that Natalie is portraying two different characters. What about her vocal register changes? What is different in the two characters, postures and movement? Where do ritual and routine come into play in the film?

CHAPTER SEVEN
DIALECT COACHING: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Practice it so that it's second nature,
so that when you're doing it, you're
not thinking about the dialect and it
just feels part of you.

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DIALECT COACHING: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

SUBCHAPTERS

- Warm Up With Vowel Sounds
- Learn From Primary Sources
- Build on Your Character's Place of Origin
- Ways to Work Independently

CHAPTER REVIEW

When preparing for roles that involve a foreign language, accent, or dialect, Natalie works with her dialect coach, Tanya Blumstein. The voice work that Natalie does with Tanya is about much more than changing the way she speaks—it's about understanding where the character is from and who they want to be. Keep in mind that an accent should sound truthful and faithful, so that it does not distract your audience.

Dialect is informed by many facets of your character's background—where they come from and any experiences they might have had that influence the way they speak. This usually includes both upbringing and education. Dialect hinges on specificity; for example, if your character is from an Italian family and was raised in Brooklyn, you have to capture the nuances of both influences—you can't just do a broad interpretation of a Brooklyn accent. There can be many variations of any dialect, so be aware of that in your own research. Documentaries and interviews that feature people who speak in that dialect help illuminate accents, gestures, and colloquialisms.

Learning a dialect is about breaking down sounds and practicing them over and over again. A good way to practice is to take out the consonant sounds and just work with the vowel sounds. Essentially, you are finding ways to exercise your palate and get your mouth in the shape it needs to be in for the dialect to become second nature. Natalie advises that when you start to learn new sounds, it's good

to exaggerate them so that your body can get used to them. Don't worry too much about how you sound or if it feels silly—you'll tone it down later.

Practice your character's dialect as much as possible. When you don't have the luxury of working with a coach, find someone to rehearse with over and over again. You can also try practicing while doing a rote physical activity like cutting vegetables, folding laundry, or going on a walk. You want to practice your lines until they are ingrained in you. This will help you stay focused when you're on set working with the director who may offer adjustments.

LEARN MORE

Get a copy of *Accents: A Manual for Actors* by Robert Blumenfeld. This is a comprehensive overview of almost all dialects. It also comes with an audio CD for reference. To begin, read these excerpts from the book to begin:

- List of Phonetic Symbols Used in This Book
- Foreword: What This Book Is and How to Use It
- Practice Exercises and Sentences
- Introduction: General Principles and Advice; General American English Compared to Standard British English (RP)

This reading will serve as a basic introduction to dialect work and give you a better understanding of sound changes, mouth placement, and pitch before moving on to learning the specific sounds of your chosen dialect.

As Natalie runs through some French sounds with Tanya, watch how her mouth changes shape and differs from when she is speaking in English. Speaking relies on the way you hold your lips and jaw and the way your tongue sits in your mouth. Learning a new dialect often means adjusting these placements, so you need to develop an awareness of how your lips, jaw, and tongue all work together to create various sounds.

Familiarize yourself with the International Dialects of English Archive ([IDEA](#)) website, which indexes recordings of many different dialects. When you're preparing for a role with a dialect or accent, use IDEA as a resource.

ASSIGNMENT

Choose a dialect to work on through the IDEA site, or scan Blumenfeld's book for inspiration. Some common dialects include variations of British (RP), Southern American English, Russian, and Australian. Use the audio CD included with the book to find warm ups for your chosen dialect.

Natalie talks about figuring out how the word "um" translates to your dialect. This is usually a great starting point for mouth placement. Research "um" in your chosen language and play around with making the sound. Does it help you figure out how to hold and use your mouth in your dialect?

Tanya suggests the following phrase for dialect practice, because it explores a variety of vowel sounds: "All I want is a proper cup of coffee from a proper copper coffee pot." Pay attention especially to the "aw" sound. She also recommends using simple poetry or fun phrases, like those found in Dr. Seuss's books. Try reading Tanya's phrase a few times in the dialect, and then incorporate some Dr. Seuss poems as you begin to familiarize yourself with your new accent.

Once you feel comfortable in your chosen dialect, call a parent or a close friend and have a full conversation with them in that dialect. Take note of how you feel afterwards and if there are specific sounds that you struggle with, jot this down in your notebook for future reference.

CHAPTER EIGHT
DIALECT COACHING IN JACKIE

“

Think about what the accent tells you about the person. The dialect can inform character choices, and then the character choices can inform the dialect.

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DIALECT COACHING IN *JACKIE*

SUBCHAPTERS

- Study the Particularities of Your Character’s Dialect
- Study the Way Your Character’s Voice Shifts Over Time
- Notice Where the Breaths and Hesitations Are

CHAPTER REVIEW

Natalie and her coach, Tanya, worked together to recreate Jackie Kennedy’s unique dialect for Natalie’s role in the film *Jackie*. Throughout their preparatory work, they used all of the resources at their disposal, including televised interviews and recorded audio.

Understanding Jackie’s upbringing gave some clues as to why she sounded the way she did. She was originally from Long Island but went to school at Miss Porter’s, an elite, private, preparatory school for girls in Farmington, Connecticut. At Miss Porter’s, girls were trained to speak in a specific mid-Atlantic dialect that was considered more lady like at the time. As a result, Jackie mixed her pronunciation of sounds—she’d even pronounce the same vowel differently within the same sentence. The sentence, “I rather love this hall,” (shown at 2:00 in the video lesson) is a good example of this variance: “rather” having a mid-Atlantic sound and “hall” exposing her Long Island roots. This phrase and combination of sounds seemed like the essence of Jackie Kennedy.

Natalie did vocal warm ups with key phrases like, “I rather love this hall,” and word lists that Tanya compiled. Tanya also identified a breathy quality in Jackie’s voice, which varies throughout her interviews but is most present in the White House tour. Natalie would drill herself into the dialect using the word lists, which grouped certain words with similar vowel sounds together, like the “aw” sound in “talk,” “walk,” and “chocolate.”

When portraying a historical figure who has plentiful and specific footage, you have the opportunity to pay attention to small details, like where they take breaths. Why do they breathe at that particular moment? Are they hesitating or thinking? The moments in which a person takes a pause offer great clues to what's actually going on for them versus what they want you think is going on. This is also known as subtext, which is an interesting way to reveal layers and add depth to a character.

When doing your own dialect work with a character, it's important to remember that a lot of people are inconsistent with the way they speak and the sounds they use, so sometimes as an actor you have to make a choice as to what sounds you will use and when you'll use them. Natalie was able to do this very specifically with Jackie because of the many recordings available to her. If you don't have the same option, place the sounds where they sound and feel the most authentic to you.

LEARN MORE

Before you begin working on the dialect sounds, give yourself a five minute facial massage to loosen up the new muscles that you will be using. Focus specifically on massaging the hinge of your jaw, as that's generally a very tense place. Massage your lips as well, and do some tongue circles, both inside your mouth and around the outside. Refer to [this article](#) for more in-depth guidance.

Reference the section called "Practice Exercises and Sentences" in Robert Blumenfeld's book. Use these exercises to work out your mouth before you practice your dialect.

ASSIGNMENT

Apply your dialect to the scene you've memorized. Have a partner come over to read with you. Film yourself doing a read with the dialect and without the dialect, and then watch both takes. How does it change you? Do you find yourself behaving differently? Is your pitch different? What about your physicality? Record your findings in your notebook.

CHAPTER NINE
WORKING ON SET

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When you finally get to set, you've done all the work—so the important thing is to relax, be confident, and just try and be as fearless as possible.

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WORKING ON SET

SUBCHAPTERS

- Accept the Presence of the Camera and Crew
- Engage Emotionally With Your Collaborators
- Communicate What Makes You Comfortable
- Keep Play Alive During Downtime
- Protect Yourself From Negative Energy on Set
- Engage Your Body Before Performing

CHAPTER REVIEW

When it's time to shoot, show up to set with a sense of fearlessness and playful energy. Be confident with the work you're bringing to the table, but also be flexible, as unexpected things may happen. Be an active listener (to both the director off camera, and your fellow costars when you're acting), as this will allow for your real vulnerability and work to shine through.

No matter how prepared you are, or where you are in your career, you may experience feelings of self-consciousness. Natalie incorporates the following lesson from her acting coach Gerry Grennell to help her be more present and less self-conscious: Embrace everything that is in your field of vision. Everything that you see, including the camera, cast, and crew, is all information for you to process. By way of holding all of this inside, you can accept that what is happening is real and conscious. Don't ignore the camera, accept it.

Next, as you ease into your day on set, endeavor to have an emotional connection with your collaborators—the camera operators, directors, and fellow actors. These connections inspire Natalie, and she draws from them when she needs to. This is especially useful if you're feeling emotionally disconnected in your scene for whatever reason.

Natalie also talks about moments when you might feel especially vulnerable on set, including emotionally tense or nude scenes. The way you feel about performing with these circumstances is

important, so listen to your gut as to what you might need to feel comfortable. Share these needs with your first AD or director. Closed or small sets are a given for shooting any type of nudity, however, if a scene feels vulnerable in an emotional way, you can ask for the same thing.

For Natalie, a key form of preparation includes knowing what to do before you show up in front of the camera. She has created rituals that both engage and relax her, like breathing exercises.

Keeping the play alive while working on set is an important part of Natalie's process. For her, doing a crossword puzzle helps her stay engaged during downtime. Figure out what helps you stay focused in between shots throughout your day. Stay attentive to the people around you on set—your costars and crew—so that you're tuned in and your nerve endings are out, as Natalie says. But if there is drama or negative energy on set, take care of yourself first. You can't always choose who your work with, so find ways to absorb only the positive energy. Know when to take space, and try to keep the negative energy that doesn't help you to a minimum.

ASSIGNMENT

Create a 15- to 30-minute ritual that grounds and engages you before arriving on set. For example, you could read something that inspires and uplifts you, meditate, journal, stretch, or take a brisk walk. Be creative and find one or two things that work for you. Begin to incorporate your ritual at the same dedicated time each day. Even if you don't have an acting job, continue to do your ritual practice so that it becomes part of your daily life. Because every day is often unpredictable, finding a routine like this will ground you as an actor.

Make a list of five to ten activities that engage your brain. Maybe it's doing crossword puzzles like Natalie or listening to a podcast or reading a blog you like. Use these activities to stay focused whenever you have a role, so that you don't fall into bad habits like checking your email or scrolling through social media on set.

CHAPTER TEN
PERFORMING ON CAMERA

“

I've generally found actors to be incredibly generous partners in a scene. The more you give, I've always found, the more you receive back. There's this real excitement in getting to play together.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

PERFORMING ON CAMERA

SUBCHAPTERS

- Memorize Your Lines in Advance
- Bring Multiple Ideas to the Table
- Have a Point of View, but Be Flexible
- Continuity
- Watching Playback
- Be There for Your Fellow Actors
- Find What Works for You to Physically Evoke Emotion

CHAPTER REVIEW

Natalie feels she can do her best work on set if she arrives prepared. She starts working on her lines for one hour every day for a month before she starts shooting. Usually she works with someone else, but she also has methods to work alone, like reading or saying her lines out loud. She also writes out her lines to help solidify them in her mind. Ultimately, she prefers to have very solid memorization of her lines. However, the extent to which she'll perfect her lines depends on who the director and/or writer is. Make sure you know what's expected from you by your director. Some directors want you to know your lines cold, while others prefer that you leave room for improvisation.

Natalie encourages a strong point of view based on all the prep work you've done and suggests coming to the table with ideas, but also reminds you that flexibility is key as you begin to collaborate with the director. Jot down notes in the margins of your scenes as you do your work. This is especially helpful for adding depth to smaller or supporting roles. Commit to your character choices, but be ready to change if the director asks you for something different. When there is time for multiple takes, Natalie recommends starting with your first choice for the character. Then, you can work in the more unexpected choices during subsequent takes. No matter what choices you make, try not to over plan and always let what's happening in the present moment with your fellow actors inform your decisions and how you react.

On set, you will be expected to have an awareness of continuity, but you shouldn't think about it too much for your character.

After a few takes, you may have the opportunity to watch playback. This is only useful if you do so in a constructive way with regard to your acting, not what you look like. For example, if you think you're conveying an emotion to camera but you're not sure if it's reading, ask to take a look at the monitor. It's good to check in with the director first because they can tell you as well, if they haven't already provided an adjustment.

When you're shooting a scene, be generous to your costars. Think of acting as play, but remember to stay present, listen, and react appropriately according to your character. This includes being aware of how you're acting when your coverage is being shot as well as when your costar is on camera. Don't radically change something when it's their turn for coverage. During intense or physical scenes, it's sometimes helpful to have a moment of human connection to ground yourselves. Try taking a breath, looking your costar in the eye, and touching their hand. Check in with your co-star to see if their needs are being met, and hopefully they will in turn do the same for you. All actors have a different process and way of working, so be respectful of that and communicate.

Heightened emotions can be a challenge for some actors, no matter who they are. Some emotions come easily to Natalie, and some don't. Know this about yourself so that you can best prepare for a highly emotional scene, whether it's extremely funny or extremely sad—know what you need to get yourself to those places. If tears don't come naturally, don't worry; there are plenty of ways to conjure emotions, as long as you have clarity about your character and the material.

LEARN MORE

Research the different types of shots in the film. This is necessary vocabulary for you to understand while you're on set so you know how to prepare your performance in each shot. The different shots will inform what parts of your body are in frame and what's not, so be sure to have at least a broad understanding. A great starting place is [this article](#) from the New York Film Academy.

Go through your script and pinpoint moments where you notice that physical continuity is important. For example, if your character uses a cell phone a lot, you'll have to think about how you handle the device—do you keep it in your pocket or handbag? Which hand will you use to take it out?

ASSIGNMENTS

If you're struggling with memorizing your lines, try using Natalie's techniques. Read the scene through a few times solo so you have a holistic understanding, then:

- Write out your lines from memory as best as you can.
- Have a partner come read with you. There's also a great app called LineLearner, which lets you record two characters' lines and then play back the other character's lines, essentially acting like an electronic scene partner.
- Research other ways to learn lines that work for you. Another old standby is to simply cover each line with a piece of paper, memorize that line, and keep building as you go.

Natalie talks about coming to the table with a variety of choices. Try approaching the scene you memorized like a director. Make notes in the margin as to how you would direct yourself in the scene to get three or more different takes. No matter which idea you end up using on set, it's good for your role prep and furthering your understanding of the material.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
WORKING WITH DIRECTORS

“

Every member of the crew is contributing something unique, but the director is the conductor, making sure that everyone is on the same page and using everyone's best talents.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

WORKING WITH DIRECTORS

SUBCHAPTERS

- Understand Your Director's Vision and Process
- Watch Yourself On Screen to Break Acting Tics
- Give Your Director Choices

CHAPTER REVIEW

The relationship you establish with a director from the beginning of your collaboration is very important. Like a conductor, the director is the primary driver of a film's vision, but they're also counting on you to bring creative ideas to the table, too.

For your first meeting or phone call, prepare some questions to ask your director. If you can, look up the director's past work and familiarize yourself with their style. Ask about research, and if there's anything in particular they'd like you to read, listen to, or watch. You can also inquire about their process—how many takes do they like to do (or what does the budget allow for them to do) and how faithful to the lines do they want you to be. Are they open to improvisation or would they prefer that you're word-perfect? After you've started a dialogue with the director, you can build what they tell you into your prep work.

In regards to making choices, Natalie has learned from her experience of directing herself and watching herself do the same thing over and over again. She learned that she needs to bring more varied choices to a scene in order to give the director several options. The more choices and change you give to a director, the better. Terrence Malick explained to her that it's about creating transitions in a scene. Give yourself permission to play and create more, even in the in-between moments.

Natalie likes to watch playback of herself in order to learn. Take a look at the monitor when you can (but always be sure to check in with the director that they're comfortable with you doing this) and try to watch yourself objectively. Look out for acting tics—maybe you bite your lips in a certain way or move your eyebrows a lot like Natalie does. These are probably subconscious habits. It's best to break these bad habits, or “kill your favorite babies,” as Mike Nichols told Natalie. The more you become conscious and aware of these habits, the easier they will be to eliminate from your performances.

LEARN MORE

Academy Award-nominated director and screenwriter Terrence Malick has developed a body of work consisting of meditative feature films that explore deep philosophical and existential questions, often set against spectacular natural backdrops. Terrence's second film, *Days of Heaven* (1978), is part of the canon of seminal films for its artistic achievements. Natalie costars in his 2015 film, *Knight of Cups*, and his 2017 film, *Song to Song*. Begin with *Days of Heaven*, then move through Terrence's oeuvre to see elements of his signature style develop and progress.

Mike Nichols began his career as a stage director, garnering acclaim and winning Tony Awards with Broadway productions like *The Odd Couple* and *Barefoot in the Park*. He successfully translated his theater expertise to his first film, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), which won five Academy Awards and catapulted the budding film director's career. Natalie costars in his 2004 film, *Closer*, as “Alice,” a stripper who serves as the muse to Jude Law's novelist character, Dan Woolf. She was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance. Watch (or re-watch) *Closer*; then watch his classics *The Graduate* (1967) and *The Birdcage* (1996) for examples of how his intimate directing style creates a productive environment for creativity—and comedy—to run wild.

ASSIGNMENT

Have a partner come over and film you doing the scene you've chosen in a medium shot. Watch yourself after and see if you notice any tics. Hand movements? Eyebrows? Anything you notice that seems like a habit. Film it again with the awareness of these habits. How was this take different? Could you still focus on your acting or was it all about the tic? Jot down your findings in your notebook so that you can continue to be aware and change your habits.

CHAPTER TWELVE
SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS WITH DIRECTORS

“

Darren Aronofsky was a very important director for me to work with. It was one of the first times I've really felt that I could interact with my director in a playful way where it was like, 'Let me try this, let me try that...' and he would suggest things to me in that same way.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS WITH DIRECTORS

SUBCHAPTERS

- Darren Aronofsky: Find a Sense of Play
- Anthony Minghella: Vary Your Approach
- Mike Nichols: Discover the Range of Your Voice
- Anthony Minghella: Find Breath in Unexpected Places
- Mike Nichols: Name Moments Emotionally
- Pablo Larrain: Find the Tension in Every Scene

CHAPTER REVIEW

Throughout her acting career, Natalie has had the opportunity to work with many different directors. Each director she speaks about has a specific style, and they each vary in the ways they work with actors. Through these experiences, Natalie has developed flexibility, strength, and a sense of play as an actor. She's been influenced by each of their styles, and has brought these lessons into her own work as a director.

When she worked with Darren Aronofsky on *Black Swan*, she really appreciated his understanding of individual actors' needs. She was able to watch him work differently with different actors. He recognized what type of feedback individual actors responded to and adapted to their styles.

Mike Nichols, who directed Natalie in *Closer*, was an important mentor for Natalie. He suggested that she work on her voice, and this constructive criticism played a big part in how Natalie moved forward in her career. Mike also taught Natalie about naming emotional moments, which helped her to be specific in her storytelling. As an actor, you must know your beats and how to track your emotional progression throughout a script and align with your fellow actors to make sure you're all telling the same story.

When Anthony Minghella directed Natalie in *Cold Mountain*, she learned new ways of approaching performance. One of his techniques was to use the element of surprise to change the actor's reactions. Anthony would have actors give different offscreen lines to surprise each other, like "It looks like your baby's dying," to create unexpected reactions and evoke a change in the actors' performance.

In their collaboration on *Jackie*, Pablo Larraín gave Natalie insight into looking for tension in unexpected places. If you're allowed multiple takes and time to play, try to get creative in the scene. Read between the lines; sometimes there's more under the surface than you might initially gather from a first read.

LEARN MORE

Do some research about how voice connects to breath and vice versa. For some basic breathing exercises, check out this [article](#).

For a better understanding of the importance of training your voice as an actor in addition to some useful warm-up exercises, refer to this [article](#) written by a voice teacher at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

ASSIGNMENT

Revisit the timeline you created on your character mapping worksheet with Mike Nichols's concept of character change points in mind. Name each of the emotional moments in the scenes with your character, being as specific as you can. Use the phrase "This is the moment when _____" and fill in the blank for each beat of their storyline.

Practice a few warm-ups of your choosing for 15 minutes each day throughout the class. Consider incorporating some of these exercises into the ritual you've started to create.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CASE STUDY: WORKING WITH TERRENCE MALICK

“

Terrence Malick was an incredible mentor to get to work with in terms of throwing away all the rules of filmmaking. You realize a lot of these rituals aren't as important as you think.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

CASE STUDY: WORKING WITH TERRENCE MALICK

SUBCHAPTERS

- Don't Dictate to the Audience
- Exploring Improvisation in *Knight of Cups*
- Create Emotion Through Gesture
- Find Emotional Breath in Voice-Over Work
- Keep Going, Even When Your Scene Ends

CHAPTER REVIEW

Working with Terrence Malick was a unique opportunity for Natalie, because he doesn't abide by the traditional rules of filmmaking. On Terrence's films, the actors only have hair and makeup done once in the beginning of the day with no touch ups. Natalie found this to be helpful in maintaining her character, because she experienced what it was like to live moment to moment in the skin of the character throughout the day.

Generally, Terrence creates a theatrical environment. Within his sets, you can walk freely without worrying about hitting a mark. He instructs his actors to move continuously—never stopping, never sitting, never being still on camera. The actors guide the camera with their movements, which means that the actors and the camera operator need to be in sync. This way of working requires an acute awareness of the camera's position. Natalie talks about creating interesting angles with her body for the camera to capture; in order to do this, she has to be very in touch with her character's physicality and the relationship to the other character(s) in a given scene.

In *Knight of Cups*, Natalie's character is married and having an affair; she feels conflicted, but she's also in love. Terrence works with little to no script, so he sent Natalie books and films that related to her character to help her prepare for the role. She found the experience to be very collaborative and ultimately very freeing, because it felt like they were building something together. Her prep work also gave her the confidence to do his well-known long takes.

When Natalie was faced with her first improvised love scene, she drew from her deep understanding of her character's relationship with her lover and used a physical gesture that was truthful, creative, and safe. Natalie chose to put her foot in Christian Bale's mouth, a provocative and sexy moment that conveyed the emotion of the scene. It's important to always communicate what your boundaries are to your costars and director, especially when working in an improvised way.

In *Knight of Cups* and *Song to Song*, Terrence uses voice-over to create a collective subconscious that guides both films through multiple characters' points of view. Natalie drew inspiration from Linda Manz's voice-over in another Terrence Malick film *Days of Heaven*.

Natalie has also applied some of the lessons she learned from Terrence to her own work as a director. She likes to let the camera roll past the scripted scene ending, because sometimes that's when the most truthful and creative moments happen. That doesn't necessarily mean that the actors continue to speak—she tries to see what you find in silence. It's more important that the feeling of the scene continues, as long as you stay in the moment. In your prep work, try to think about what your character would do after your scene ends.

LEARN MORE

Watch *Knight of Cups* and study Natalie's performance. Observe her movement and physicality in the scenes she's in, and watch how she uses the environment. Also pay attention to her voice-over work. Can you hear how she uses breath and tone to evoke emotion in the audience? Write your observations in your notebook.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
PLAYING A REAL CHARACTER

“

There was an incredible amount of writing, and also footage of her. That was really helpful to develop the exact voice and the exact accent and the movement, which is very specific to her.

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PLAYING A REAL CHARACTER

SUBCHAPTERS

- You Should Only Know as Much as Your Character Does
- Research to Inform Your Character's Physicality and Psyche
- Look for the More Complicated Emotions
- Invent, But Stay True to Your Character's Authenticity

CHAPTER REVIEW

When Natalie got the opportunity to play Jackie Kennedy in *Jackie*, she felt immense pressure. Since Jackie is such a recognizable historical figure, Natalie knew she had to create a character that audiences would believe, and that would require great attention to every detail, starting with her accent, tone of voice, and appearance. She also recognized that it was necessary to find a balance between imitation and her own interpretation.

Playing a historical figure requires intensive research. As you dive into that research, remember to only focus on what the character knows during the time period the film covers. Your character won't know anything beyond that, as he or she is not psychic.

In *Jackie*, Pablo Larraín constructed a reenactment of Jackie Kennedy's famous White House tour. Natalie studied the broadcast of the original tour in order to match Jackie's posture and vocal quality—down to the specific head movements we see in the clips. But she was not just imitating; Natalie was also connecting Jackie's posturing and voice to the emotions she perceived from the given circumstances: a woman under pressure who wants to convey as much poise and grace as possible to the public.

When you do get the opportunity to play a historical figure, be your own detective and see what you can uncover about a character that isn't immediately apparent. Use every source possible to do this.

Between the Internet and your public library, you won't be short on information! Sometimes it's a lot of work to sift through, but the payoff of creating a real and believable historical figure is worth it. Once you firm up your understanding of the historical facts of the character's life and world, give yourself the freedom to create a character that is unique to your interpretation.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
ASSIGNMENTS IN DEVELOPING PERFORMANCE

Assignment 1: Character
Assignment 2: Scripts
Assignment 3: Research
Assignment 4: Directors

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ASSIGNMENTS IN DEVELOPING PERFORMANCE

ASSIGNMENT 1: CHARACTER

Pick three films starring an actor you admire. Watch the films, paying attention to how the actor approaches each of the characters. Think about how they use breath, how they use hair and makeup, costume, and props to portray each character. How do they use their physicality to convey each individual character? Make specific notes about what they do and how it changes from film to film in your notebook.

ASSIGNMENT 2: SCRIPTS

Find one of the scripts from one of the films you chose above. Using the character the actor played, make a character map. Chronologically map the character's journey, choosing moments you can name where the character undergoes change. You can chart the character's progress by completing a series of phrases that begins with "this is the moment when." Then, choose scenes that your character shares with other characters in the film and try to describe those relationships. How differently does the character relate to each of the relationships they have in the film? Also, think about how those individuals see the character. Ask yourself how your character *thinks* the other characters feel about them. These inquiries will better your understanding of how that character exists in the present moment. Refer to the character worksheet for reference.

ASSIGNMENT 3: RESEARCH

Choose a film in which an actor or actress plays a historical figure. Watch the film, and afterwards, do the research as if you were going to play that character. Dig deep for video footage, documentary footage, and anything else you might find. Refer to the earlier chapters on developing character to refresh your memory on research tips. What details do you think this actor chose that informed their interpretation of the role?

ASSIGNMENT 4: DIRECTORS

Who were the directors of the three films you chose? Do a little research on each director. Note their style. How do they use the camera to capture the performances? Is the performance improvised or do they like to rehearse? Research interviews with the actors and cite how they talk about the different directors and how they worked with them. Did it influence their way of performing?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
IMPROVISATION

“

In a situation where you have to improv or where you're allowed to improv, remember to have fun. You're playing. You're inventing. You're able to make things up for your character.

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IMPROVISATION

SUBCHAPTERS

- Engage With Your Environment
- Listen Carefully; React Accordingly
- Discuss Boundaries With Your Costars
- Talk With Your Camera Operator About Where You Can Go

CHAPTER REVIEW

Improvisation is another way to discover character. It can give you more insight and is a great tool to tap into aspects of your character that are beyond what's in the pages of a script. Some directors and writers like to use improv as an exercise for actors to engage and become more familiar with the character. When you are given the chance to improvise, you're given the opportunity to create. Think about what your character might be doing in the given circumstances of the scene that isn't necessarily written. How might they move around the space or interact with other people in the scene? The more fun and playfulness you can bring to your improvisation, the more you might discover about your character.

Take stock of your environment. As you look around, think about how your character relates to the space and how they would use the given props. The production design in a scene can enhance your improvisation. If you have an idea for a prop or wardrobe addition that's helpful to your storytelling but is not written in the script, ask to see if it's possible to obtain.

Natalie highlights some basic tips for beginning to improvise. Active listening is an important part of improv, because you have no idea what's coming. You need to stay alert in order to react accordingly in character. This is where some of your character research and analysis can come into play. Also, know your character's given circumstances and be realistic within those guidelines. Ultimately, you're building a

scene, and one of the best ways to do that is to remember the phrase “yes, and...” This means that you’re always accepting your fellow actors’ ideas and then adding to them in order to further the scene.

As you think about these things, it’s also important to discuss boundaries with your costars. Everyone should feel physically and emotionally safe, so as ideas come to you, check in with your scene partners. It’s also a good idea to check in with your camera operator. As you move around the space, you’ll want to know what’s in frame, where the well-lit areas are, if any spaces are off limits, and how close you can get to the camera. If you’re going to do anything that requires the camera to move quickly, let the camera operator know. In general, remember that communication is key to having a fun and productive improvisation!

LEARN MORE

Familiarize yourself with the fundamentals of improvisation in comedy. Start with the book *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* by Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim “Howard” Johnson. It’s required reading for any actors entering into an improv-training program, such as Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB). It will give you a basic understanding of improvisation as a stand-alone art form, including a more in-depth explanation of the “yes, and...” rule. The most relevant chapters to focus on are chapters one through four. As you read through, write in your notebook what improvisational tips you think you can apply to your acting work.

ASSIGNMENT

Using the scene you’ve been working on, try some improvisation. Have a partner come over and work with you. You can choose to improvise up until the beginning of the scene, or you can start at the top of the scene and improvise after it ends—whatever makes the most sense for your material. If it’s helpful, set a timer for three minutes for the improvisation part. Keep your given circumstances in mind, but remember to play and have fun. Don’t get too caught up in whether or not it’s right for the scene. Also, keep in mind the rule of “yes, and...” to avoid getting stuck. Saying “no” in improv is generally a scene killer!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
DEMO: WORKING WITH THE SET, PROPS, AND CAMERA

“

Of course you do your preparation as an actor, as you normally would for the character... but you also need to think about what you have in your space, what kind of props you can work with, what kind of movement you can do. You want to make sure that the camera operator is in sync with you emotionally.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

DEMO: WORKING WITH THE SET, PROPS, AND CAMERA

CHAPTER REVIEW

Natalie gives us an inside look at what it's like to work with the set, props, and camera. In order to be successful at this kind of work, it's important that you've done all your prep work and research so that you feel grounded in your character and can think about how they would move in any given environment.

To prepare for her sample scene, Natalie familiarizes herself with the space that she's shooting in. In regards to her props, she checks in with the production designer. She asks some of the following questions:

- What can I break? Are there multiples?
- Is everything edible? Is there extra food if we need to keep reshooting?
What appliances work?
- Can I turn on the lights?
- Is there anything I should avoid touching or interacting with?

Next, Natalie asks her camera operator and director a few key questions for her clarification:

- Where can I move in the space?
- Can I use the doors and windows?
- How close can I get to the lens without affecting focus?
- Is anywhere off limits in the space?

Once she has all of the information she needs, Natalie enters the apartment with her given circumstances: a woman has just discovered that her boyfriend has been cheating on her. She's able to make certain props in the scene emotionally relevant; for example, writing "Fuck you" on a photograph of a cat, which makes the audience think it is perhaps a cat they have or had together. She also takes the time to let the camera see her close up to convey the intensity of the emotion she's feeling. Everything Natalie does is precise, specific, and with intention. Every prop that she uses she imbues with meaning to show her character is in an emotionally fraught situation.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
GREEN-SCREEN ACTING

“

I always liken it to being a kid with a refrigerator box and saying, ‘This is my spaceship,’ because you’re inventing both what’s outside of you and what’s inside of you as you’re going through the scene.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

GREEN-SCREEN ACTING

SUBCHAPTERS

- Ask for Previsualization Materials
- Figure Out the Beats for Your Movement
- Don't Lose Sight of the Internal
- Root Action in Emotion

CHAPTER REVIEW

Natalie speaks about green-screen acting as “the purest form of acting,” because you rely solely on your imagination. When doing this kind of work, you’re inventing both what’s going on inside of you and what’s happening externally.

Even though you’re expected to create the emotional internal life of the character, Natalie encourages you to ask questions of your team to help you shape the rest. The key people to talk to are the director and visual effects (VFX) supervisor. Ask them what their vision is. Do they have anything prepared that you can look at, which will give you a visual sense of what is going on around you? In many instances, they will have materials prepared to help you imagine what’s going on. This can include what the environment looks like—as in Natalie’s *Annihilation* example (timestamp 1:23)—and what the character you are interacting with looks like.

One of the challenges of working in green screen is coordinating your eyeline with the movement of things around you. Many times you won’t know the speed of objects; a common trick used on green screen sets is to have actors follow a tennis ball on a stick. This way, your eyes have something to focus on, and you’re all in sync. However, when you’re dedicating mental energy to staying focused on the physical aspects of green-screen acting, you must also take care to keep the emotional connection you have to the character. Constantly ask yourself: How does what you’re seeing make you feel? Then, your reaction and interaction with your environment will be authentic to the character.

There are two ways to work when you're interacting with a computer-generated image that's not actually there with you, i.e. a monster or an alien that you're fighting. Usually, the director or first AD will talk you through the beats (the monster is getting closer, now they are threatening, now it's distracted, etc.), and the way they use their tone of voice to intensify the situation can help you react to the given circumstances. If you prefer, you can also create your own beats and timing. In this way, you can use your imagination to think and feel through what's happening to make the movements feel more natural to you. Keep in mind that some special effects are inserted into the film after shooting, and the VFX team will create the environment based on what you do in the shot.

When acting in a film with a science fiction or fantasy element, Natalie likes to root her character in what the monsters and aliens represent for her emotionally. Maybe you're fighting a piece of yourself. Or perhaps you're curious about them or welcoming them in. Of course, not all the fights you have with monsters will be deep internal struggles, but at times you can find a way to connect and explore this option. No matter what, it's most important to always keep your character's emotional life in mind, even in sci-fi environments. Natalie gives a great example of this inner emotional struggle in her character's battle with her "double" in *Annihilation*.

LEARN MORE

Further your understanding on what to expect when you're shooting in green-screen from an actor's perspective [here](#).

Watch Natalie's performance in *Annihilation*. Now that you have a better understanding of how green screen acting works, notice how she acts with computer-generated images and effects. Do you notice a change in her when she's acting with real-life costars versus VFX? Keep in mind that her "double" in the film was another actor/dancer, too. Write down your observations in your notebook.

CHAPTER NINETEEN
ADVICE FOR ACTORS

“

Whether you're working or not, it's always important to be engaged with culture. I think being inspired all the time by other people's art, whether it's seeing other films, seeing theater, going to museums, going to concerts—keeping that inspiration and creativity flowing is really important.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

ADVICE FOR ACTORS

SUBCHAPTERS

- Auditioning Advice
- Advocate for Others on Set
- Bring Desire and Humanity to Stereotypical Roles
- Staying Inspired

CHAPTER REVIEW

Some of Natalie's advice about auditioning stems from her experience as a director. For example, she suggests dressing in costume to help casting directors visualize you in the role. Keep in mind that it's best to be simple and subtle, while also suggesting the setting with the character's wardrobe. Also, there's no need to go out and spend an exorbitant amount of money on an audition outfit—see what you can come up with from your own closet!

In your preparation at home, it's important not to get stuck in one way of performing your audition. Flexibility with the choices you've made is key, because the director wants to see that they can direct you and get a different performance if need be. If you've done all your research and spent the necessary time preparing, adjustments will come easily. Remember the given circumstances in your scene and keep an open mind when working in the audition room. They want you to book the job, too, or they wouldn't have called you in!

It's helpful to think about your audition like a job interview—be professional, show up on time, and be prepared. While you're in the waiting room, be respectful and kind to your fellow actors. Everyone has their own process and needs to prep for their audition in a unique way. When you do finally get into the room and meet the casting director, their assistant, and maybe, the director (especially if it's a callback), look them in the eyes.

No matter what role you're playing, whether it's starring, supporting, or saying one line, it's important to bring creativity to the part. Strive to take roles that make you feel proud. If a role seems stereotypical,

find a deeper meaning for your character or other ways to make your character more interesting. The more complicated and honest you can make your characters, the more believable they will be.

When you're working on a production, cultivate an awareness of how everyone is being treated. If you're in a position to do so, advocate for fair and respectful treatment of all. If you're unsure about an uncomfortable situation, make sure you check in with the parties involved. Especially if you're the star, it's easier for you to speak up and get it solved. Check in with someone like the AD for help. This goes the same for advocating for those that might not have voice to speak for themselves like children or animals.

Most importantly, take care of your inner artist. Stay present and engaged with culture in your town or city. Find inspiration in other artists, and prioritize going to museums, seeing films, plays, and concerts. Keep your creative muscles active, especially since there will be ebbs and flows in your acting career.

LEARN MORE

Writer and filmmaker Julia Cameron is the author of *The Artist's Way*, a guide to cracking through creative blocks and staying inspired, regardless of your craft. The concept of the "Artist Date" is an important part of *The Artist's Way*: experiencing and absorbing art is as integral to your creativity as the rest of your process. An Artist Date is a solo activity that engages your senses and frees your mind. This can be anything from taking a meditative walk to going to a gallery or concert. For more ideas, refer to Julia Cameron's [online tool kit](#).

ASSIGNMENT

Have a partner come over and film you doing your scene as you would in an audition. Feel free to use the dialect you've been working on if you like. After your first read, have your partner give you some direction to try something different. Any kind of direction is fine, since it's less about making sense and more an exercise to see how you take direction. Watch both takes. Did you notice a change in your second read? If not, think about what you can do to make an adjustment so it's different for you and shoot it again. Write down your thoughts about the experience in your notebook.

Start a creative log for yourself separate from the notebook you're using for this class. Something pocket size that you can carry everywhere is great. Use this notebook to write down things that inspire you in your day-to-day life, whenever the moment strikes. Inspiration can come from anywhere, but some examples include people, works of art, songs, films, or photographs. You will always have a point of reference to jog your creative memory when you need it.

CHAPTER TWENTY
ACTIVE EMPATHY

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It's the act of empathy.
That is what we do.

NATALIE PORTMAN / MASTERCLASS

ACTIVE EMPATHY

CHAPTER REVIEW

Acting is, quite literally, the act of empathy. As actors, you are constantly imagining someone else's inner life. As you continue to work on different characters and stories, you're always thinking about what it's like to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, and how that life can be so different from our own.

Take note the next time you go to see a film in a theater, or go to see a play. When you do view art in public, you share a social experience with the rest of the audience. For a short period of time, you look outside yourself and care about someone else's life, whether it's historical or fictional. This is an important practice to partake in as a community, because it cultivates a collective empathy.

Lastly, remember that acting is unlike other art forms, because you're not doing it alone. You are constantly collaborating with other artists while you create. Find joy in that collaboration and let it fuel you. Be free, make mistakes, and play! Acting can be an extremely fun, playful, and meaningful job all at the same time.