

7 Levels of Tension
Stage 1—Desired Results
SEI Lesson Plan designed by Lucy Kania &
Kayleen Honan

Established Goal(s): To be able to identify and embody the seven levels of tension and apply their understanding of it to characters they are playing/studying.

Understanding(s):

Students will understand that . . .

There are seven different, progressive levels of tension.

How the levels of tension feel in their bodies.

How to create each level of tension in their bodies.

What situations or states of mind/being elicit different levels of tension.

How to apply the levels of tension to a character.

Essential Question(s):

What are the seven levels of tension?

What do the different levels of tension feel like in our bodies?

What situations elicit different levels of tension?

How can we use the levels of tension to help us play a character?

Students will know . . . Students will be able to . . .

Students will know the seven levels of tension. Students will be able to embody the different levels of tension and apply them to a character.

Stage 2—Assessment Evidence

Performance Task(s):

Think/Pair/Share Discussion and Reflection Questions

Moving through the levels of tension exercises, both in order and when a number is randomly selected

Other Evidence:

Demonstrating levels of tension in motion and in stillness

Materials and Resources

7 Levels of Tension Powerpoint w/ Photos & Video

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xRtMDJgrXDU4oLlzmEVTn_ndUMVKu4SN/view?usp=sharing

Slips of paper in a hat with a number 1-7 written on it. Chair.

Stage 3—Learning Plan**Learning Activities:**

W - Warm up introduces the concept, key vocab, and experience of tension and gives teacher a chance to assess students' grasp on the concept.

H - Powerpoint examples from popular culture and discussion prompts to relating to students' real life experiences will hook their attention and hold their interest.

E - Powerpoint presentation & Think/Pair/Share discussion prompts will introduce and reinforce key vocab and concepts, and explore how they relate to real and fictional people and scenarios.

R - Physical levels of tension explorations will revisit each level multiple times, giving students the opportunity to rethink and revise their understanding of that level of tension.

E - Peer-to-peer discussion following exploration exercise will allow students to evaluate their work and understanding by sharing discoveries about themselves or their characters (Prompt: what was one discovery you made about yourself or your character? What was one key difference between yourself and your character?)

T - Visuals, kinesthetic/hands on learning, interpersonal peer-to-peer discussion, and intrapersonal reflection all target different learning styles and abilities. Teacher pacing will provide processing time.

O - Variety of activities, and repeated student involvement in discussion and physical exercises will sustain student engagement and effective learning.

Warm up

Go over “what is tension”, “how do you create tension in your body?” Ask students to show examples of tension using their bodies and write definition on the board
SEI: define term and show examples, show spelling and in writing to help ELL students understand the concept

Ask students to close their eyes and think about the questions. No response needed.

- Take deep breaths
- Where are you holding tension right now? Release it
- Tense face muscles for 5 seconds, release
- Tense neck muscles for 5 seconds, release
- Tense shoulders muscles up to ears for 5 seconds, release
- Tense arm muscles by balling hands into fists and curling biceps in for 5 seconds, release
- Tense hands and arms outstretched like a zombie with hands flexed as if pushing against a wall for 5 seconds, release
- Tense chest muscles for 5 seconds, release
- Tense stomach muscles for 5 seconds, release
- Tense glute muscles for 5 seconds, release
- Tense thighs muscles for 5 seconds, release

- Tense feet by flexing so hard your heels lift from the ground for 5 seconds, release
- Tense every muscle in your body and hold it as tight as possible for 10 seconds, and release. Repeat whole body tension again for 10 seconds.
- What does it feel like to release that tension?
- **“Tension can change the way we experience the world, and how your character experiences a situation. Knowing how to tense parts of your body can be a tool to you as the actor.”**
- Can you think of a time when you were extremely tense? Why was that? Maybe a big test. Or your siblings got you in trouble and it wasn't your fault. Where in your body do you feel that tension?
- Take three deep full breaths, filling all of your lungs and stomach with air, and let all your tension melt away. And open your eyes.

Share out loud: In two or more words was that experience like for you?

SEI: low risk activity that is intrapersonal and can help the teacher understand where each student is at with understanding the term “tension” and if/how to ELL students can embody tension

Main Activities

Present: “7 levels of tension” slide show.

Explain: “today we are going to be learning the seven levels of tension. This is a technique developed by Jacques Lecoc (Jz-ock Le-cock), who was a French stage actor and acting coach. He is best known for his physical theater, movement, mime and mask work.

There are seven levels of tension ranging from being a lifeless ameba blob on the ground to being a petrified statue of tension.”

Present: the slides and ask the accompanying questions which can be answered in a think-pair-share and/or group discussion. (discussion questions are in bold with examples students may share bulleted below)

SEI: presentation has visuals, writing, video clips from pop culture and opportunities to reflect personally on subject matter, reflections can be shared with partner or large group

1) **Exhausted or Cationic**

- “The Jellyfish”
- No tension in the body at all
- Complete state of relaxation
- If you have to move or speak it is real effort
- Wet noodle, lifeless

- **At what point in your day are you at a level 1?**

- When my alarm goes off in the mornings

2) **Laid back** (the “Californian”)

- The “Californian”
- Cool, calm, relaxed way of living
- Probably lacking in credibility
- Sluggish, loose and fluid
- **When do you exist at a level 2?**

- When watching TV

- When scrolling through my phone

3) **Neutral or Economic**

- “It is what it is” there is nothing more, and nothing less
- It is the right amount of tension to maximize potential
- Totally present and aware, no past or future
- The state of tension before something happens
- Actors neutral before you go on stage
- **When in your daily life are you at a level 3?**

- When walking in the halls at school

- When going to my kitchen

- When brushing my teeth

4) **Alert or Curious**

- Slight tension suddenly
- Heightened senses, aware of the world a little bit more
- Stand, sit, pace, fidget
- Indecision
- Fully charged and ready to go for a big event
- We live in 1-4 in our everyday lives
- **What kind of event makes you feel level 4 tension?**

- When I am trying to remember where I put my phone

- When I have to choose which snack to grab before running out the door

- When I am taking a test

- When I am driving

- Right before I go onstage

5) **Suspense or Reactive**

- The crisis is about to happen
- All the tension is in the body
- All in breath
- There’s a delay in your reaction, your body reacts
- Fight or flight sense kicks in
- **When have you suddenly reacted to something with a level 5 tension?**

- When a balloon pops suddenly, or a car backfires. When something jumps out at me or I see a spider.

- When I am about to send a text that someone may get mad at me for

6) **Passionate or Explosive**

- “Operatic”
- The tension has exploded out of your body
- Anger, fear, hilarity, despair.
- It’s difficult to control
- Snake in the shower. Lion in your room!
- **Have you ever had your tension explode out of your body?**
 - When yelling at my siblings
 - Road rage
 - Chasing someone in the middle of a rainstorm to tell them you love them as the music swells and you have to scream it!

7) Tragic

- Body can’t move, petrified beyond fear
- The body is solid in tension
- Every muscle is flexed
- Greek tragic moment where everything is taken from you
- **Can you think of a play or movie where the character’s experience a level 7?**
 - Romeo and Juliet
 - Oedipus Rex
 - Hunger Games
 - King Lear

If time allows watch videos of examples moving through the seven levels.

Personal Levels of Tension Milling & Seething Exercise:

- Start at Level 1
 - Everyone find a spot on the floor and lie down, relax your body completely
- Move progressively through the levels of tension, prompting students to experience each level in their bodies as they stand up and begin to move around the space. When you reach level 7, begin to take students back down in descending order until they have returned to their catatonic state on the floor.

Character Levels of Tension Milling & Seething Exercise:

- Repeat the last exercise, but with students thinking about/embodying a character (if your students are not already working on a character in class, have them pick their favorite fictional character).
- Before beginning the exercise, while students are lying down, prompt them to feel all of their own thoughts and feelings draining out of them as the tension drains out, and to start feeding in the thoughts and feelings of their character,

so that as they move through the levels of tension they experience them as that character would experience them.

SEI: Reinforces the key vocab from the earlier presentation with hands on experience/experimentation. Ascending/descending order of levels of tension provides repetition. Repetition of exercise as self and character allows students to absorb the concepts first and then connect them to the larger context of theatre/acting.

Levels of Tension Guessing Game:

- Pass around a hat with slips of paper with the numbers 1-7 written on them. Set up a chair at the front of the classroom.
- Each student pulls a number from the hat but does not share their number. Give students time to review the Levels of Tension on their own and make sure they understand what their number represents and remember how it felt in their body during the last two exercises.
- One by one, have students come to the front of the classroom, and then enter the space and sit in the chair, all while embodying the level of tension that they pulled out of the hat (this could be done in character or just as themselves). Have classmates guess which level of tension they just saw by holding up the number of fingers of their guess.

SEI: Reinforces the key vocab from the presentation and last exercise, but in a more focused/theatrical performance. Relies on visual and kinesthetic clues. Helps the teacher assess students' understanding of the vocab and concepts from the lesson, both as performers and as audience/guessers.

Wrap-up

Share out:

When is your character at a tension level 3? (The neural or economic level)

When in the show is your character at a tension level 5? (the suspense or reactive level)

Do any of the characters in the play reach a tension level 7? Who and why?

What is one discovery you made about your character's tension levels?