

*How to Succeed in High School
Without Really Trying*

a play by Jonathan Rand

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Cast of Characters

AN ENSEMBLE of anywhere between 7 and 230 actors

Place

A stage

Time

Now

Production Notes

This is an ensemble play. Feel free to assign the roles however you see fit, regardless of the indicated names or genders.

For the various visual demonstrations, agents can use handheld signs; or slides can be projected; or some other method. Whatever works best.

The Agents can be dressed like regular students, or dressed in professional attire. The idea isn't that they're akin to FBI agents, or agents from *The Matrix*, but that they're simply a highly organized ring of students that has commandeered an in-school assembly.

Throughout the play, high school subjects are mentioned. Feel free to replace such subject names with those your audience are most accustomed to. For example, the play mentions "Phys Ed" as a subject. If "Gym" or "P.E." is a more familiar term to your audience, go ahead with that.

How to Succeed in High School Without Really Trying

by Jonathan Rand

(Lights up to several student AGENTS on an auditorium stage.)

AGENT GILBRIGHT. Good afternoon, eighth-graders.

AGENT SMITH. We have temporarily kidnapped your teachers and have infiltrated your scheduled assembly on Dress Code-Compliant Footwear to bring you the following public service announcement.

AGENT RICHARDS. Over the next several minutes, you will see a series of tips and tricks that will guide you through your upcoming four-year nightmare.

AGENT PERCY. So please listen closely while we change your life.

AGENT BAKER. Presenting, for the first and only time...

AGENT RAMSEY. How to Succeed in High School...

AGENT WILSON. ...Without Really Trying.

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AGENT CUNNINGHAM. Lesson One:

ALL. Homeroom.

AGENT BRADLEY. The beginning of every student's day is the simplest. Yet there is one crucial component that must be handled with great care:

AGENT LANE. Attendance.

AGENT ANDREWS. If you miss too many days, it could mean trouble.

AGENT RUIZ. Which is why we recommend a simple workaround.

AGENT PATRICK. And that is:

AGENT HARPER. Legally change your name to: “What.”¹

AGENT FOX. Here’s how it works.

(Lights up on at least five chairs and/or desks. Each contains a STUDENT except for an empty fourth seat – this is where What would sit were she not absent today.)

AGENT RILEY. Now that your name is What, if you can’t make it to roll call, no problem. Your trap has already been set.

(MRS. TRUCKLE is midway through taking attendance; she’s looking directly at her attendance sheet and never looks up.)

MRS. TRUCKLE. Felicia Walker?

FELICIA. Present.

MRS. TRUCKLE. Robert Walters?

ROBERT. Present.

MRS. TRUCKLE. Erica Weinstein?

ERICA. Present.

MRS. TRUCKLE. What?

ERICA. *(A little flustered:)* Uh, present?

MRS. TRUCKLE. Jennifer Wilkins?

JENNIFER. Present.

(Back to AGENTS.)

AGENT WEAVER. And just like that, without breaking a sweat, you’ve got yourself a devoted and completely unaware accomplice. Thanks, Erica Weinstein.

ERICA. *(Still confused:)* What?

AGENT LOWRY. Other than What, there are a wide variety of names to choose from, such as *(Signs are displayed for each of the three names.)* Huh?, Sorry?, and Repeatwhat U. Saidasecondago.

¹ A possible visual here would be to create an oversized driver’s license on poster board, with the actor’s actual head where the photo should be. During the name change moment, the original name is removed from the poster board to reveal the new name of What.

AGENT CHEN. Be sure to proceed with caution, however:

AGENT LAWRENCE. Such names may have confusing ramifications later in life.

(911 OPERATOR speaks on the phone with SORRY. Sitting near SORRY is WHAT, very pregnant and breathing heavily. For a brief moment, one agent shows a Ten Years Later sign, and two other AGENTS show a What sign and a Sorry sign with arrows pointing to each corresponding character – for audience clarity.)

OPERATOR. 911, emergency response.

SORRY. Hello. I'm Sorry. My wife's having a baby!

OPERATOR. Okay, stay calm, sir. What's your wife's name.

SORRY. That's right.

OPERATOR. Sorry...?

SORRY. Yes?

OPERATOR. Who's having a baby?

SORRY. My wife.

OPERATOR. What's your wife's name.

SORRY. Uh huh.

OPERATOR. What?

SORRY. Exactly.

OPERATOR. I'm sorry...

SORRY. You're Sorry, too?

OPERATOR. This is confusing.

SORRY. You're saying we're both Sorry.

OPERATOR. I'm saying I'm what?

SORRY. Wait, are you Sorry or What?

OPERATOR. Sir, what is the emergency?

SORRY. Yes, What is the emergency.

OPERATOR. I'm sorry...

SORRY. No, I'm Sorry!

OPERATOR. Why are you sorry?

SORRY. I've been Sorry since high school.

(A moment of recognition for OPERATOR.)

OPERATOR. Wait a minute, I get it! Your names are What and Sorry! That's awesome—I pulled that same exact trick in high school!

SORRY. No kidding! What's your name?

OPERATOR. Saythat Again.

SORRY. What's your name?

OPERATOR. Saythat Again.

SORRY. What's your name?

OPERATOR. Saythat Again.

WHAT. *(Loudly and to the point:)* I'M HAVING A BABY.

(Pause.)

(Then quickly and calmly:)

SORRY. Yeah, could you get an ambulance?

OPERATOR. Sure.

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AGENT PIZZARELLO. Lesson Two:

ALL. English.

AGENT CONHEADY. There's only one rule in English class. And that is:

AGENT MCKNIGHT. No matter what you say...

AGENT ARMSTRONG. ...say it with 100% confidence.

AGENT LEW. It's the Golden Rule of English Class.

AGENT REPICCI. You don't even have to *understand* what you're saying. Just pretend you mean it with all your heart.

AGENT SANDERS. Here are some examples of what to say, regardless of the literature being discussed.

AGENT SANPIETRO. Whenever any of the following themes are mentioned:

(Signs for each are shown; the third can be a silhouette drawing.)

AGENT MIYARES. Darkness.

AGENT BRYANT. Blackness.

AGENT SIMS. Albatross.

AGENT AUSTIN. Raise your hand and say: "That's a metaphor for death!"

AGENT PETERS. Also, no matter what literature is being analyzed, if there's a mother in it, mention Freud.

AGENT LOPEZ. And no matter who the protagonist is, claim they're a Christ figure.

AGENT KELLEY. Other surefire methods include:

(As AGENTS deliver the following three methods, STUDENTS demonstrate each one.)

AGENT FRANKLIN. Stroking your chin.

AGENT RYAN. Nodding.

AGENT GUTIERREZ. Stroking your chin *while* nodding.

AGENT FIELDS. And whenever possible, using the word "juxtaposition."

AGENT GROVE. For example:

WENDELL. *(Stroking his chin and nodding throughout:)* It's positively Freudian how the novel's Christ-like protagonist is juxtaposed with that albatross of death.

AGENT SCHMIDT. We're also aware that many English teachers require their students to recite literature aloud in class.

AGENT CARR. Whether it's Wordsworth or Shakespeare, the Golden Rule of English Class still applies:

AGENT MCKNIGHT. No matter what you say...

AGENT ARMSTRONG. ...say it with 100% confidence.

AGENT RICHARDS. If you're unprepared or don't understand the material, it makes no difference as long as you speak the words with mysterious intensity.

AGENT WILLIAMSON. Bonus tip: Add random pauses and punctuation. It will make you seem like you know more than you actually do.

AGENT JOHNSTON. Take Robert Frost:

ROBBIE.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
 and sorry? *(Pause.) I...could...not...travel...both!*
 And be one travelER, lonnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnng I stood
(Whispered:) and looked down one as far as I could
(Weeping:) to where it bent in the undergrowth...
(Cursing the heavens:) THE UNDERGROWTH!!

AGENT BANKS. This same method can be used with anything ever written, so feel free to practice at home with more familiar material.

ANNA.

Now that it is raining more than ever.
 Know that we will still have each other.
 You can stand under my umbrella
 You can stand under my umbrella
 Ella. Ella. Eh. Eh. Eh.²

~ § ~

² Recite this using whatever intense interpretation you choose. If Rihanna's "Umbrella" no longer resonates with your audience, pick a newer, comparable song.

AGENT WOOD. Lesson Three:

ALL. Math.

AGENT BARNES. Math is hard.

AGENT ROSS. Way hard.

AGENT HENDERSON. So hard that cutting corners isn't really an option.

AGENT COLEMAN. Which is why *we* say: If you can't beat 'em...

AGENT JENKINS. ...join 'em.

AGENT PERRY. And here's how:

AGENT HUGHES. Step 1: Identify a math partner.

AGENT PATTERSON. This partner must be, without a doubt, the best at math in your class.

AGENT BUTLER. You're looking for a very specific breed of student, so the selection process is key.

AGENT WELCH. Allow us to demonstrate. Say you're a girl...

GIRL. I'm a girl.

AGENT WELCH. ...and you're looking for the smartest male mathlete in your class.

AGENT SIMMONS. First you'll need to carefully scrutinize your options.

(AGENTS examine the SUBJECTS one at a time, using a variety of instruments. Each SUBJECT could be sitting at a desk, could appear in a pool of light, could walk onstage and off – whatever works best.)

AGENT FOSTER. Subject A.

AGENT GONZALES. Note the higher-than-average definition of subject's arm muscles.

AGENT BRYANT. This likely means that a disproportionate amount of his spare time is spent in the weight room.

AGENT SORKIN. And as the saying goes:

AGENT PEAVEY. If he's wailing on his pecs...

AGENT GRIFFIN. He ain't solvin' for X.

AGENT DIAZ. Physique Test fail.

AGENT HAYES. Subject B.

AGENT MYERS. Determine if subject's cologne can be identified at a ten-yard range.

AGENT FORD. (*Calling to unseen OFFSTAGE AGENT:*) Cologne check!

OFFSTAGE AGENT. Eternity for Men!

AGENT HAMILTON. It can therefore be inferred that the subject's focus is on what's inside his mirror and not what's inside that parabola.

AGENT GRAHAM. Smell Test fail.

AGENT SULLIVAN. Subject C.

AGENT WALLACE. Socks match scarf.

AGENT COLE. Style Test fail.

AGENT WOODS. Subject D.

AGENT JORDAN. Subject's five o'clock shadow and barbed-wire tattoos clearly indicate subject is well into his 20s.

AGENT WEST. Therefore, subject is likely taking basic algebra for the third or fourth consecutive year.

SUBJECT D. (*Proudly:*) Fifth.

AGENT OWENS. Age Test fail.

AGENT REYNOLDS. Subject E.

AGENT FISHER. Below-average physique...

AGENT ELLIS. Faint odor of generic-brand body soap...

AGENT HARRISON. Attempt at matching yellow and purple...

AGENT GIBSON. Suitable age range, as evidenced by Dora the Explorer lunch box...

AGENT MCDONALD. Furthermore, said lunch box could indicate an even younger age, implying at least one skipped grade...

AGENT MARSHALL. Ladies and gentlemen? Jackpot.

AGENT FREEMAN. Step 2: Use complex strategic maneuvering to arrange a social interaction.

GIRL. Wanna go out?

TRIG. Yes.

AGENT SIMPSON. Step 3: Automatically master math through osmosis.

AGENT TUCKER. By merely spending time with your new partner, math expertise is effortlessly attained, as equations and theorems literally seep into your pores.

AGENT PORTER. For example:

(A Halloween party. GIRL wears a standard Halloween costume; TRIG wears a T-shirt that simply displays a square root of negative one.³ Other partygoers could be nearby in regular costumes.)

TRIG. Check out the cosine on this chicken tender.

(He hands tender to GIRL.)

VAMPIRE QUARTERBACK. *(To TRIG:)* What are you supposed to be?

TRIG. Uh, an imaginary number? Obviously.

(VAMPIRE QUARTERBACK blankly tries to process this. Then:)

VAMPIRE QUARTERBACK. I'm a vampire.

(VAMPIRE QUARTERBACK walks off.)

GIRL. *(To TRIG:)* That guy thinks he's square-root-of-4 cool square-root-of-16 school.

(TRIG takes a moment; then gets it.)

TRIG. Mathtastic! High Square-Root-of-Twenty-Five.

(They high five each other.)

AGENT HUNTER. In no time at all, and with zero effort, you have instantly and unconsciously become a math expert.

GIRL. *(To audience:)* To the Nth degree.

³ For quick-change purposes, both might wear these costumes under their classroom clothes.

AGENT GREELY. Step 4:

AGENT WEBB. (and this is important)

AGENT GREELY. Love each other forever.

AGENT STEVENS. Unlike in the movies, where the girl uses the math nerd to succeed, only to then dump him and run off with the quarterback – this is *real* life.

AGENT HENRY. And in *real* life, even though Algeboy may seem out of touch and socially inept...

(AGENT GIBSON *reminds the audience by tapping the Dora the Explorer lunch box.*)

AGENT HENRY. It's only temporary.

AGENT MASON. And in ten years, while the cool kids have long since lost their cool, Mathman grows up to be the most centered, most driven, and least awful guy you'll ever meet.

AGENT WOMACK. So in ten years...

(*Lights on an AGENT with a Ten Years Later sign.*)

AGENT GOODSPEED. ...would you rather have landed the starting quarterback?

(*Lights on the QUARTERBACK in his late-20s, wearing a food-stained undershirt. He stares catatonically at an unseen TV with a remote in one hand and a piled-high nacho or Hot Pocket in the other.*)

QUARTERBACK. [Unintelligible semi-grunt.]

AGENT BARTLEY. Or the math nerd?

(*Lights on TRIG in his late-20s, now a put-together guy, holding a classy bouquet of flowers. He speaks in a totally normal voice, and perhaps gives a genuinely charming wink.⁴*)

TRIG. You do the math.

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⁴ If possible, these future versions should be the same actors; if there's no time for a costume change, though, they can be a different actors, as long as it's clear they're both the same guy ten years later.

AGENT MACH. Lesson Four:

ALL. Foreign languages.

AGENT WILLISIE. First and foremost: because time limitations prevent us from covering *all* foreign languages, we're required to draw one language at random from this box.

AGENT FLYNN. And today's language will be...

(AGENT JONES puts her hand a box, rummages around, and pulls out a baguette or croissant.)

AGENT FLYNN. ...French!

AGENT OWENS. French it is. Now, regardless of the foreign language you're taking, the recipe for success is the same. And that is:

AGENT UTLEY. If you're ever in a tough spot where you don't know what to say...

AGENT SAWYER. ...just rattle off random words anyone would know.

AGENT BLAKE. To illustrate, here is a student's class presentation on Parisian travel:

(LEON stands with note cards in front of either a slide show, or a person or persons showing signs with pictures on them. LEON uses correct French pronunciation throughout.)

LEON. Bonjour! Présentation? Voilà.

(Slide: Map of France.) France.

(Slide: Eiffel Tower.) Paris.

(Slide: Cinderella's Castle.) Disneyland Paris.

(Slide: Motel Six.) Le Motel Six!

(Slide: A random woman with brown hair.) Brunette.

(Slide: People laughing.) Joie de vivre!

(Slide: A waiter.) Garçon.

(Slide: A midget waiter.) Petit garçon.

(Slide: Bowl of soup.) Soup du jour!

(Slide: A scoop of ice cream.) À la mode.

(Slide: The exact same brunette from earlier.) Déjà vu.

(Slide: Guy with an obvious hair piece.) Toupée.

(Slide: A toilet.) Toilette.

(Slide: A chaise lounge.) Chaise lounge.

(Slide: Angelina Jolie.) Jolie.

Merci beaucoup! Encore? Encore?

AGENT POLK. That's all it takes.

AGENT BROWN. And in the rare event your teacher doesn't buy it, you'll be ready.

MR. ZURM. Monsieur, your presentation was a disaster. All you did was rattle off random words anyone would know.

(Pause.)

LEON. Touché.

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AGENT NICHOLS. Lesson Five:

ALL. Science.

AGENT GRANT. Some teachers use what's called "mnemonics" to help students memorize scientific concepts.

AGENT FERGUSON. Mnemonics are common phrases that jog the memory. For example:

(Seven AGENTS appear with a sign for each word.)

AGENT HAWKINS. To help memorize the taxonomic classifications of Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, and Species...

AGENT STONE. ...all you have to do is remember, “King Phillip Came Over From Great Spain.”

(Each AGENT flips her sign to reveal the corresponding word on the back of the sign.⁵)

AGENT DUNN. ...an expression that regularly comes up in everyday conversation.

(Lights up on JOAN and KARL.)

JOAN. Hey Karl, what’s up?

KARL. King Phillip Came Over From Great Spain.

JOAN. Cool! See ya later!

(Lights back to presentation.)

AGENT SPENCER. We’ve found that current mnemonics are old-fashioned and thus no longer effective.

AGENT PAYNE. For easier memorization, we recommend new and improved versions.

AGENT BERRY. For example: To remember the kingdoms of Monera, Protista, Fungi, Plant, and Animal—

(One sign is shown for each kingdom.)

AGENT RAY. —just think:

(Each sign is flipped to reveal the mnemonic text.)

AGENT RAY. “My Pants Feel Pretty Awesome.”

AGENT WATKINS. Or to remember the four DNA components Guanine, Adenine, Thymine, and Cytosine.

(One sign is shown for each component.)

AGENT OLSON. —just think:

(Each sign is flipped to reveal the mnemonic text.)

AGENT OLSON. “Go Away, Tom Cruise.”

⁵ For all mnemonic examples, the first letter of each word should be highlighted in some way—either the first letters can be a different color, or the signs can have two layers, with the common thread being the first letter. Regardless of the method, it should be made clear that the first letter of each word is the common thread.

AGENT CARROLL. It's that easy.

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AGENT MOORE. Lesson Six:

ALL. History.

AGENT ANDERSON. What's the hardest part about studying for a history test?

AGENT DAVIS. The answer, of course, is dates.

AGENT JACKSON. That's right – dates.

AGENT HARRIS. And we don't mean the kind of dates this creepy guy goes on.

CREEPY GUY. Hi there.

AGENT HARRIS. We're talking about moments in history.

AGENT THOMPSON. And there are quite a few moments in history to remember.

AGENT GARCIA. How many revolutions and treaties and wars have there been?

AGENT ROBINSON. *A lot.*

AGENT SCOTT. *At least four.*

AGENT BAKER. What you're about to see is an actual example from an American History exam.

(AGENTS use signs or slides to illustrate.)

AGENT EDWARDS. When was the Battle of Appomattox?

AGENT COLLINS. (A) 1861

AGENT STEWART. (B) 1863

AGENT MORRIS. or (C) 1865

AGENT SANCHEZ. Hard to know the answer when you've got hundreds of other dates occupying your brain.

CREEPY GUY. Hi there.

AGENT SANCHEZ. Which is why we've established a way to make studying easier.

AGENT MORGAN. Notice a common thread among these dates?

AGENT SEXTON. That's right... They all start with 186.

AGENT BELL. And odds are in your favor that the final number will be different for each option.

AGENT COOPER. Which means when you're studying, you only need to memorize two words:

AGENT HOWARD. Appomattox... and 5.

(MORRIS holds up the "C. 1865" sign; a sound effect indicates this is the correct answer.)

AGENT BANFF. By cutting out 75% of your work, a one-hour study session now lasts fifteen minutes.

(Lights on SETH and BETH.)

BETH. Declaration.

SETH. 6.

BETH. Watergate.

SETH. 3.

BETH. Moon.

SETH. 9.

(Lights to AGENTS.)

AGENT RICHARDSON. It's that simple.

AGENT WARD. One digit is all you need.

AGENT PETERSON. A word of caution, however: This special method may cause confusion elsewhere in life.

(Lights on each example.)

VALEDICTORIAN. Congratulations, Class of 6. It feels like only yesterday that we were freshmen, back in 2.

TV ANNOUNCER. And the Red Sox are 4 world champions!!

PRINCE. *(Singing:)* So tonight I'm gonna party like it's 9.

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AGENT DIXON. Lesson Seven:

ALL. Phys Ed.

AGENT REYES. For some people, forced physical exertion is a welcome activity.

AGENT BURNS. But not for normal people.

AGENT GORDON. Which is why there's an easy way to eliminate all sports from your high school day.

AGENT SHAW. And that is:

AGENT HOLMES. Let your voice be heard.

(Lights up on WALKER – perhaps at a podium – with various followers behind her, holding protest signs.⁶)

WALKER. We are sick and tired of the violence! Of the barbarism! And of the inhumanity!

ANGRY MOB. Braaaauugh!

WALKER. Bone-crushing sporting events are deteriorating our bodies – and our souls!

ANGRY MOB. Braaaauugh!

⁶ Example protest signs:

- Zero Strikes and I'm Out
- Hell No, Stubbed My Toe (or "Heck No")
- I'm Inflexible about Flexibility
- Ow
- [A circle-slash with a "W" inside alongside a circle-slash with a "L" inside.]
- Ground Rule Trouble
- Last Down
- Short Shorts Hurt My Chances With Women
- No We Can't

WALKER. Just look at what happened to Timmy Johnson's finger.

TIMMY. (*Holding up his finger:*) It hurts a little!

ANGRY MOB. Braaaauugh!

WALKER. No more touch...down...baskets!

ANGRY MOB. Braaaauugh!

WALKER. No more curve...ball...pucks!

ANGRY MOB. Braaaauugh!

WALKER. And we've had it up to *here* with holes-in-one, holes-in-two, and most of all holes-in-three!

ANGRY MOB. Braaaauugh!

WALKER. We will no longer stand idly by in our peace-loving learning-sanctuaries, while high-impact death-athons known as Soft Ball, Kick Ball, and Tether Ball, are *thrust* upon us. Especially – and I mean *especially*... (*Pause of quiet intensity.*) ...when it's muggy out.

ANGRY MOB. Braaaauugh!

(*Back to the presenters.*)

AGENT BRITTON. And when the school board eventually bends to your protests –

AGENT RICE. – and they will –

AGENT BRITTON. – don't let them deceive you by merely switching volleyball to badminton, and tennis to ping-pong.

AGENT ROBERTSON. Such replacements still require you to move your legs.

AGENT HUNT. You simply must not quit until you've won the race.

AGENT BLACK. And we mean the figurative race. A real race would involve legs.

(*Back to the protesters.*)

WALKER. What do we want?!

ANGRY MOB. Low-impact activities that barely resemble actual sports!!

WALKER. When do we want it?!

ANGRY MOB. Third period!!

(Back to the presenters.)

AGENT DANIELS. And once the people have spoken...Phys Ed will never be the same...

(Lights up on TWO STUDENTS sitting across from each other, with a big CROWD OF STUDENTS surrounding them. The TWO STUDENTS begin a thumb war. They do so with zero intensity. The CROWD goes nuts, as if at a football game.)

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AGENT BISHOP. And that concludes our final lesson.

AGENT HOWELL. We hope you'll apply some of what you've learned today, and succeed in high school with flying colors.

AGENT MORRISON. And if you fail...we're sorry.

SORRY. No, *I'm* Sorry.

AGENT HANSEN. This has been...

AGENT BURTON. How to Succeed in High School...

AGENT REID. ...Without Really Trying.

ALL. You're welcome.

(Blackout.)

End of Play