

Team

CARDS

PRACTICAL GUIDE

A COMPANION RESOURCE TO THE ISTA
TENSION, EMOTION, ATMOSPHERE &
MEANING CARDS

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MAKING MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Created by **Mike Bindon**

ISTA'S **TEAM Cards** are a practical toolkit for creating, describing and refining powerful theatrical moments. TEAM stands for **Tension, Emotion, Atmosphere** and **Meaning**, four qualities that shape how an audience experiences a moment of performance. Each card opens with the same simple phrase, "A moment where...", giving students an immediate creative starting point without dictating what story they tell.

WHY NAMING THE MOMENT WORKS

Students often know when a piece of theatre work lands with an audience, but struggle to say why. TEAM gives them the language to find out: is this moment powerful because of its tension, its emotional charge, its atmosphere, its meaning, or some combination of all four? Once students can name what is happening in a moment, they can shape it deliberately, repeat it, and explain it.

This guide shares the method behind that process: how to use a TEAM card to create a moment, how to use TEAM language to discuss and refine it, and how to build both into a lesson, a devising project or a rehearsal room.

Who This Guide Is For

The method in this guide, and the cards it is built around, are designed to flex across age groups, settings and time frames.

- ✓ Ages 11 and up, with activities that scale up or down
- ✓ KS3 and KS4 / GCSE Drama
- ✓ IB MYP Arts and DP Theatre
- ✓ A Level Theatre Studies
- ✓ BTEC Performing Arts
- ✓ Devising, rehearsal and performance analysis at any level
- ✓ Teacher training and staff CPD sessions



The deck is organised into four categories, each focusing on a different quality of a theatrical moment.

- **Tension** – moments of pressure, suspense, conflict or anticipation
- **Emotion** – moments where feeling drives action, relationship or response
- **Atmosphere** – moments where mood, tone and environment shape the audience's experience
- **Meaning** – moments where performance communicates an idea, message or human truth

Every card begins with the same phrase, "A moment where...", so the starting point is always a quality of experience rather than a plot point.

The full deck contains 212 prompts across the four categories, offering hundreds of possible combinations for warm-ups, devising, rehearsal, analysis and reflection.

WAYS TO USE THE CARDS

The same deck can do very different jobs depending on how you frame it. Here are some of the ways drama departments use TEAM Cards across a year.

In the classroom

- **Starter:** Give pairs one card and one minute to prepare, then a minute to improvise a short scene or image inspired by it.
- **Plenary:** After watching a piece of work, ask which TEAM element was strongest, and what created it.
- **Devising stimulus:** Use a card as the starting point for a new piece, before any discussion of subject matter.
- **Rehearsal reset:** When a scene feels flat, pick a card and replay the scene with it as the new focus.
- **Peer feedback:** Use TEAM language to move feedback beyond "I liked it" towards naming the choice that created the effect.
- **Assessment task:** Set a card, or a small hand of cards, as the basis for a devising or analysis task.
- **Cover lesson:** Hand a small set of cards to a cover teacher with simple instructions. The structure runs itself.
- **Ensemble building:** Use Emotion or Atmosphere cards early in a new group's life to build trust and shared focus quickly.



Beyond the classroom

- **Script exploration:** Apply a card to a scripted scene to discover which TEAM element it relies on, and how to strengthen it.
- **Warm-up:** Use a single card as a two-minute physical or vocal warm-up before any rehearsal.
- **Written reflection:** Ask students to complete the sentence "The strongest TEAM element in our work was... because..." in a journal or logbook.
- **Theatre club:** Run a regular "card of the session" to keep returning groups fresh and curious.
- **Festival or showcase preparation:** Use a card to sharpen the impact of a moment in an existing piece.
- **Staff CPD:** Use the deck as a shared vocabulary for staff to discuss each other's work, or their students' work, more precisely.

THE CORE METHOD: PICK A CARD

Every activity in this guide, and every activity in the deck, runs on the same five-step method. Once a group knows it, you can use TEAM language in any spare five minutes.

1. **Pick a card.** Any category, any card. Draw at random for surprise, or choose deliberately to target a quality you want students to explore.
2. **Set a time limit.** One minute to prepare, ten to twenty to create. The limit matters more than its length, it keeps the focus on the moment rather than the plot.
3. **Apply the card fully.** Let the moment it describes genuinely shape the work, not just sit alongside it.
4. **Share and name it.** Show the work, then say which TEAM element was strongest, and which practical choice created it.
5. **Decide what to keep.** The card does not need to stay visible in the final work. Often, naming what it created is enough to strengthen the choice permanently.

Scaling the method

- **A spare five minutes:** one card, one short improvisation, one moment named afterwards.
- **A single lesson:** one card to create, one card to refine, and a shared reflection at the end.
- **A workshop** (60 minutes or more): cards drawn at each stage, from warm-up through devising to refinement and reflection.
- **A term-long project:** TEAM language used throughout rehearsal to keep returning to the question of audience impact.

**TENSION****Climactic Confrontation**

A moment where two characters face off in a heated exchange, bringing underlying tensions to a head.

TENSION**Unexpected Betrayal**

A moment where a character is betrayed by someone close, shattering trust and creating conflict.

TENSION**Moral Dilemma**

A moment where a character grapples with a choice that tests their ethics and values.

TENSION**Dire Consequences**

A moment where the fallout from a character's actions becomes apparent, creating intense drama.

Tension cards focus on pressure, suspense, conflict and anticipation. They are especially useful for slowing scenes down and helping students understand the power of stillness, silence and focus. These frameworks work with any Tension card.

1**The Moment Before****DEVISING (15–20 MIN) | GROUPS OF 4–6**

Pick a card that describes a moment of anticipation, pressure or suspense.

1. Create a still image of the group just before something significant happens.
2. Each performer decides privately what their character knows, wants or fears in that moment.
3. Let the image come to life slowly. No one may speak for the first thirty seconds.
4. Add one line of dialogue each, then share and discuss where the tension was strongest.

Tip: Stillness and silence usually build more tension than dialogue. Resist the urge to fill the silence too early, for the performers and the audience.

Tension cards describe many different kinds of pressure, conflict, uncertainty, threat, anticipation, each producing a different quality of stillness.

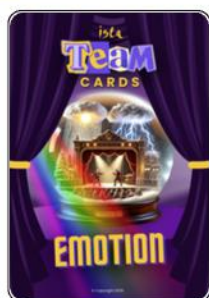
2**Holding The Line****DEVISING (15–20 MIN) | PAIRS OF GROUPS OF 4–6**

Pick a card that describes a moment of conflict or unresolved pressure between characters.

1. Devise a short scene in which two or more characters want opposing things, but neither gives way.
2. Perform the scene without resolving the conflict.
3. Replay it, this time extending the moment just before someone finally speaks or acts.
4. Discuss what built the tension, and what released it.

Tip: Ask students to locate the exact moment the tension peaks. That moment is often worth protecting and extending in performance.

Many Tension cards describe a specific kind of unresolved pressure. Each gives a different shape to the line a scene is holding.

**EMOTION****Anticipation and Excitement**

A moment of buzzing energy, where something wonderful seems within reach.

EMOTION**Reluctance and Hesitation**

A moment of cautious indecision, where uncertainty holds sway.

EMOTION**Anger and Fury**

A moment of explosive intensity, charged with frustration and raw emotion.

EMOTION**Confusion and Bewilderment**

A moment of disarray, where clarity is elusive, and certainty is shaken.

Emotion cards focus on feeling, relationship and emotional shift. They are useful for developing character, deepening scenes and exploring how emotion moves through an ensemble. These frameworks work with any Emotion card.

1**Emotional Ripple****ENSEMBLE (20 MIN) | GROUPS OF 5-8**

Pick a card that describes a moment where feeling takes hold of a group.

1. Create a shared situation: a family meal, a celebration, a group announcement.
2. One performer introduces the emotional shift described by the card.
3. Let the emotion ripple through the group, affecting each performer differently.
4. Continue until the whole group has been changed by the moment, then replay it once subtler and once more extreme.

Tip: Watch for performers who copy the first reaction rather than finding their own. Difference is what makes the ripple visible.

Emotion cards describe many different shifts and triggers. Each changes who is affected first, and how the ripple travels.

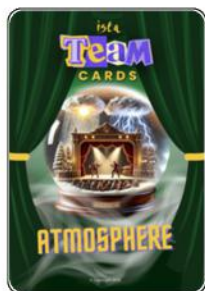
2**Inside The Feeling****CHARACTER (20-25 MIN) | PAIRS OR TRIOS**

Pick a card that describes a moment where a character's feelings conflict with what they say or do.

1. Devise a short scene in which a character's outward behaviour hides the feeling described by the card.
2. Add one small physical or vocal detail that reveals the hidden feeling to the audience, but not to the other characters.
3. Share the scene and ask the audience to identify both the hidden feeling and the visible behaviour.
4. Discuss the gap between the two, and what it added to the scene.

Tip: Keep the revealing detail small. A held breath or a delayed response often works better than a big gesture.

Emotion cards offer many different feelings and conflicts to hide. Each creates a different gap between what is shown and what is felt.

**ATMOSPHERE****Majestic and Overwhelming**

A moment of grandeur that fills the senses, evoking awe and admiration.

ATMOSPHERE**Barren and Unyielding**

A stark, empty moment that speaks of resilience against hardship.

ATMOSPHERE**Quiet and Solemn**

A moment of stillness that holds the weight of contemplation and reverence.

ATMOSPHERE**Surreal and Fragmented**

A moment where reality splinters into the unexpected, creating disorientation.

Atmosphere cards focus on mood, tone, environment and sensory impact. They work especially well with ensemble movement, soundscape, rhythm and physical theatre. These frameworks work with any Atmosphere card.

1**The Room Changes**

ENSEMBLE (20–25 MIN) | WHOLE CLASS OR LARGE GROUPS

Pick a card that describes a mood or quality that a space can hold.

1. Choose a simple location: a forest, a station, a classroom, a street, an empty house.
2. Using body, breath, rhythm and sound, build the atmosphere described by the card.
3. Add one central performer moving through the space.
4. Let the ensemble subtly shift the atmosphere in response to that performer, then discuss how the audience's understanding of the world changed.

Tip: Ask the ensemble to commit to small, sustained choices rather than big, individual ones. Atmosphere is built from repetition.

Atmosphere cards describe many different qualities a space can hold. Each asks the ensemble to build a different kind of world.

2**Sound And Silence**

ENSEMBLE (15–20 MIN) | GROUPS OF 4–6

Pick a card that describes a feeling of unease, calm or anticipation in a space.

1. Build a soundscape that creates the atmosphere described by the card, using only voice and body.
2. Sustain the soundscape for thirty seconds, then bring it to a sudden and complete silence.
3. Hold the silence for ten seconds before discussing what happened to the atmosphere when the sound stopped.

Tip: The silence after sound often carries more atmosphere than the sound itself. Give it time before moving on.

Atmosphere cards offer many different moods to build. Each changes what the silence that follows feels like.

**MEANING****Unexpected Empathy**

A moment where the audience feels sympathy for a character they didn't expect to understand.

MEANING**Shift of Power**

A moment where control suddenly moves from one character to another.

MEANING**The Fragile Object**

A moment where the treatment of a fragile object symbolises how fragile life, love, or trust can be.

MEANING**Unfinished Business**

A moment that ends without resolution, leaving the audience to decide what happens next.

Meaning cards focus on intention, message, theme and interpretation, moving beyond what happens in a scene towards what the scene communicates. These frameworks work with any Meaning card.

1

What Lingers?

DEVISING (20–30 MIN) | GROUPS OF 3–5

Pick a card that describes a moment where something important goes unsaid.

1. Devise a short scene with minimal dialogue.
2. The idea described by the card must be communicated through action, space, silence or gesture, not through words.
3. After sharing, the audience writes down what they think the scene meant.
4. Compare the audience's responses with the performers' intentions, and discuss any gap between them.

Tip: A gap between intention and audience understanding is not a failure. It is often the most useful thing to discuss.

Meaning cards describe many different ideas that can go unsaid. Each asks the ensemble to find a different way of communicating without words.

2

Reading The Room

REFINEMENT (20–25 MIN) | GROUPS OF 3–5

Pick a card that describes a moment where an audience is asked to work something out for themselves.

1. Take a short scene the group has already created, or one they devise now.
2. Apply the card by removing or replacing any line that directly states the meaning of the moment.
3. Perform both versions, with and without the direct statement.
4. Discuss which version communicated more, and how the audience's role changed between the two.

Tip: Students often discover that removing the explanation does not remove the meaning. It usually sharpens it.

Meaning cards offer many different ideas for an audience to work out for themselves, each shifting how much is said and how much is shown.



COMBINING TEAM CARDS

Once students can recognise each TEAM element individually, try combining cards from different categories. This is where TEAM moves from a vocabulary for single moments into a tool for shaping a whole scene.

The Two-Card Challenge

1. Each group picks two cards from different TEAM categories.
2. They create a short scene in which both qualities are visible.
3. The audience identifies which two elements shaped the scene, and how.
4. Groups refine the scene to make one element stronger, without losing the other.

Useful Combinations

- Tension and Atmosphere: a scene where the world itself feels unsafe.
- Emotion and Meaning: a scene where a feeling reveals a deeper truth.
- Atmosphere and Meaning: a scene where a place becomes symbolic.
- Tension and Emotion: a scene where pressure changes a relationship.

A 60-Minute TEAM Lesson

- **0–10 minutes, warm-up:** Pick one Tension or Atmosphere card to shape movement through the space.
- **10–20 minutes, introduce TEAM:** Explain Tension, Emotion, Atmosphere and Meaning using simple examples from the group's own work.
- **20–35 minutes, group devising:** Groups pick one card and create a short moment inspired by it.
- **35–45 minutes, sharing:** Each group performs. The audience names the TEAM element and what created it.
- **45–55 minutes, refinement:** Groups pick a second card and replay the scene, layering in the new element.
- **55–60 minutes, reflection:** Students complete the sentence "The strongest TEAM element in our work was... because..."

USING CARDS IN REHEARSALS

TEAM Cards are not just for generating new work. They can also unlock rehearsal problems.

When To Reach For A Card

- A scene feels flat
- Students are rushing through important moments
- The audience impact is unclear
- The emotional journey needs sharpening
- The atmosphere is inconsistent
- Students cannot explain their intention

The Rehearsal Reset

RESET (10 MIN) | WHICHEVER GROUP IS REHEARSING

1. Pause the scene.
2. Pick one TEAM card.
3. Replay the scene with that card as the focus.
4. Discuss what became stronger.
5. Decide what to keep.

Tip: The card does not need to remain visible in the final performance. Sometimes it simply helps students discover a better choice.

These prompts can be used after any activity in this guide, whether it lasted two minutes or two weeks. Choose two or three rather than working through the whole list.

BEFORE

- What TEAM element do we want the audience to notice first?
- What do we want the audience to feel?
- What do we want the audience to understand?

DURING

- Where is the tension strongest?
- How does emotion shift during the scene?
- What atmosphere are we creating?
- What meaning is beginning to emerge?

AFTER

- Which TEAM element was clearest to the audience?
- Which practical choices created that effect?
- What moment stayed with the audience most strongly?
- How could we strengthen the moment further?

TEAM: WHY THIS METHOD WORKS

Everything so far in this guide is ready to use immediately. This section explains the thinking behind it, for anyone who wants the fuller picture.

Students often know when a moment in their work lands with an audience, but struggle to explain why. TEAM Cards give that instinct a vocabulary: tension, emotion, atmosphere and meaning are four distinct qualities a moment can hold, separately or together, and naming them turns a vague impression into something students can repeat, refine and discuss.

How The Method Puts This Into Practice

Each category gives students a different lens for looking at the same moment:

- **Tension** cards help students locate and shape pressure, suspense and anticipation, often through stillness, silence and timing.
- **Emotion** cards help students track how feeling moves through a character or an ensemble, and how it is expressed through voice, body and relationship.
- **Atmosphere** cards help students build mood, tone and environment through collective, sustained choices rather than individual ones.
- **Meaning** cards help students separate what happens in a scene from what it communicates, and to test that against an audience's actual response.

Used together, the four categories give students a shared vocabulary that connects practical choices directly to audience impact, useful in the rehearsal room, in peer feedback, and in written reflection alike.

Framing This With Students

It can help to introduce TEAM as a way of asking better questions, not as a checklist to complete. Before defining the four terms, let students experience tension, emotion, atmosphere and meaning through practical work first. The language lands more easily once students have already felt the thing it describes.

The more often students move through the TEAM cycle, the more naturally they begin thinking like theatre-makers.

DRAW → EXPLORE → MAKE → SHARE → REFLECT → REFINE

 DRAW Choose a TEAM Card.	 EXPLORE Experiment with theatrical possibilities and elements.	 MAKE Create a theatrical moment inspired by the card.
 SHARE Show the work to an audience, however small and gather feedback.	 REFLECT Use TEAM language to identify what created the audience's experience.	 REFINE Replay the moment, strengthening the choices that matter most.

SUPPORTING ASSESSMENT

TEAM Cards are designed to support the practical, analytical and reflective skills required across drama, theatre and performing arts qualifications. From devising and rehearsal to performance evaluation and written analysis, the TEAM framework helps students create, discuss and refine theatrical moments with greater clarity and intention.

Qualification	How the Cards Support Learning
GCSE Drama	• Devising: Helps students create purposeful moments using Tension, Emotion, Atmosphere and Meaning. • Performance: Develops intentional acting, staging and ensemble choices. • Written Exam: Builds the vocabulary needed to analyse and evaluate theatrical effect.
A Level Drama and Theatre Studies	• Devising: Supports sophisticated creative decision-making and rehearsal refinement. • Performance: Encourages students to articulate how practical choices shape audience response. • Written Exam: Strengthens analytical and evaluative writing through a shared theatrical language.
BTEC Performing Arts	• Supports collaborative creation, rehearsal, reflection and evaluation. TEAM provides a practical framework for discussing artistic intention, audience impact and performance development throughout the creative process.
IB MYP Theatre	• Encourages inquiry through practical exploration while supporting the Creative Process Journal. TEAM gives students a clear language for describing, analysing and refining their creative choices.
IB DP Theatre	• Collaborative Project: Provides a shared framework for devising and evaluating ensemble work. • Production Proposal: Supports discussion of intended audience impact through performance and production elements. • Solo Theatre Piece: Strengthens analysis of how theatre-makers select performance and production elements to communicate meaning and shape audience experience.



READY FOR THE FULL DECK?

This guide gives you the method: how to use a TEAM card to create a moment, how to use TEAM language to discuss and refine it, and how to build both into a lesson, a devising project or a rehearsal room.

The deck gives you the material: 212 prompts across Tension, Emotion, Atmosphere and Meaning, ready to draw, combine and return to across a whole year of teaching.

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Bring the TEAM framework to life in your classroom with this set of five high-quality posters, designed to inspire creativity and support independent exploration of theatrical moments.



About ISTA

ISTA is a global arts education charity that supports schools offering theatre worldwide by providing dynamic festivals, high-quality training, and practical resources for students, teachers, and artists. Rooted in collaboration and creativity, it celebrates ensemble-based, intercultural learning through inspiring and inclusive theatre experiences.

