

Objectives and Tactics Handout

Objectives

In the theatre, an **objective** refers to that thing a character/actor wishes to accomplish at a particular point in the play. Sometimes this is called a “beat” of action. The important thing to note is that an **objective** is driven by action -- by an active verb -- and that an objective must be something an actor can accomplish.

Examples of an objective looks like these:¹

I wish to **gain** my mother’s consent

I want to **prevent** my brother from getting angry

Note that the structure of these sentences are very simple: a subjects wants to do something and get a specific, measurable response.

Objectives like these aren’t just invented; they are suggested by a close reading of the text, Shakespeare or otherwise. Often, in rehearsal, actors test objectives against the text to see what makes the best sense. In the English literature classroom, this simple acting exercise provides an active, performance-based means of doing a close reading of the text.

Tactics

Tactics are those devices we use to aid in the attaining of our objectives. So, for example, if the objective is, “I wish to gain my mother’s consent,” the actor can choose “to flatter,” “to threaten,” “to annoy.” These verbs are the helpers to the success of attaining your objective.

What about Adjectives?

Very often, when students new to theatre work on a play, they will think in terms of adjectives: e.g., this character is angry, this woman is happy, this child is sad. As audience members, we certainly assign adjectives readily to the things we see. But the actors should only be pursuing a clear action with a specific goal in mind. For example, if a person is seen running from a burning building carrying a child to safety, bystanders might see this and say, “how brave” or “how noble.” These qualities may indeed be present in the hero who saved the child. But the person who saved the child isn’t thinking of adjectives when his or her only objective is to escape from danger. It is an interesting exercise to transpose an adjective, which cannot be acted, into an objective that can.

¹ These examples are inspired by William Ball’s excellent book, *A Sense of Direction* (Drama Book Publishers, 1984). See his chapter on objectives for an accessible, thorough account of this fundamental concept. For another accessible resource, see Bruder, Melissa, et. al., *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* (New York: Vintage, 1986).