

## Intro to theatre – vocabulary #2 – reading the play

Plays are not written like books. Playwrights leave much of creating the picture to the imagination of the reader, unlike the author of a book who goes into great detail explaining the setting of each section of the story as well as the way characters are dressed and even the way they carry themselves, make gestures, and move their bodies. The text of a play must rely practically on dialogue alone to portray all of the same information. Playwrights often provide general notes about location, time of day, and year of the play and might provide a brief description of the characters. But it is up to the reader to provide the back story for the characters and discover what motivates a character through subtext alone. It is these gaps in the telling of the story of a play in which directors, designers, and actors work to construct a complete idea out of the building blocks left by the playwright.

Needless to say reading a play is not easy, especially if you know nothing about the intentions of the playwright or the main concepts he or she is working with.

**Play** – a body of text used as a basis for a live performance. Must include:

**Conflict** – tension between characters and their goals

**Production** – embodies the act of bring all of the parts together necessary to perform a play

**Performance** – a single instance of a play being taken from written word to live action in front of an audience.

### Preliminary Work

**Title** – what's in a name? Some titles tell you exactly what you can expect while others are strongly routed to the play's **Theme** – “a plays central idea; a statement about life or a moral”.

Richard II

Cats

Street Car Named Desire

Fences

Top Girls

**Cast of characters** - lists any personal information the playwright deems important for the reader to know about the individual characters as well as their relationships to one another

**Stage directions** or notes made by the author about specifics of the play he or she feels are important but are not part of the dialogue – provides **Setting** information for the course of the play.

-the year in which the play takes place

-the geographical location of the play

-the physical surrounding of the action (apartment, on a ship...etc)

-the time of day

-the weather

Take it all into account and think about the impact each of these might have on the play. What was happening in history at that time? What was the social climate – racism, sexism, anti-war sentiment, occupy movement ? The political agenda of the characters described in context of the setting. The economic environment in which the characters might find themselves.

**First Reading** – read for fun and read for overarching content. What is the plot? What are the common themes throughout the play. Develop a rough but better understanding of the characters. Read through the play without taking any notes until you are done.

**Second reading** – now reread the play and answer the six W's...

Who

What

When

Where

Why  
How

**Play Analysis** – The basic framework in which to understand the play

**Aristotle** – Greek philosopher who broke plays down into six parts for analysis

**1** Plot- the ordering of the incidents in the play

**Exposition** – “the giving of information about past events” – beginning of the play

**Point of attack** – “where the playwright begins the plot”

**Action** – “the central chain of events in the play, particularly those events of a character’s attempt to achieve an important goal”

Action is made up of:

**Discovery** – when a character identifies an obstacle and decides what to do about it

**Reversal** – most plays make use of a reversal or a moment where the main characters plans do not meet their expected outcome. This usually stems from a discovery about a

**Character flaw**

**Major Dramatic Question** – the overarching question posed by the play between the main characters

**Complications (there will be more than one throughout the Action)** – middle of the play

- “the imposing or entangling of the action” the cause of rising dramatic tension throughout the action, obstacles to the path of the main characters
- Complications can be caused by **conflict** – “clash of characters, seen as objectives that create obstacles for one another, or as actions, neither of which can succeed unless the other fails”.

**Rising action** – the escalation of complications

**Crises** – the turning point in the action where complications seem to be the most insurmountable. Usually involves a major reversal

**Resolution or dénouement** – “the declining action as crisis is passed and complication is resolved

Kinds of plot

**Linear plot** – a series of causes and effects that build on one another until a climax is reached. Usually these plays only move one direction in time, forward.

**Episodic plot** – the complications of the plot do not build on one another as with a linear plot; rather they are broken into segments of theme or idea that where that theme or idea is flushed out from beginning to end before moving on. These kinds of plots can skip around a time line.

**2** Character- the tools of the play – they are representations of the themes of the plot, boiled down to their essence to exemplify to an audience a multitude and often opposing points of view about the major dramatic question of the plot.

Kinds of characters

**Protagonist** - the central character of the play around whom the major dramatic question revolves

**Confidant** - a character who the protagonist confides in

**Antagonist** - the character who stands in the protagonist’s way

How we get to know the characters

**Actions** – what the character does to “affect the course of the story”

**Dialogue** – the text of the play that is spoken by the characters

**Subtext** – a deeper meaning to the actual dialogue spoken, the reason a character says what he or she says within the context for the plot, theme, and dramatic question

**Stage directions** – an author may make note of how a character is dressed, holds him or herself, or a characters reactions that have no dialogue such as laughing, crying, or dyeing.

**Parentheticals** – emotional descriptions of how dialogue is to be delivered usually in parenthesis and italicized

3 **Idea** – What does the play mean as a whole? Does it have more than one idea it is trying to communicate? What are the themes? Why write, read or perform this play?

Where to find the idea

**Drama** – the form of theatre that tells a story about people, their actions, and the complications that result.

**Conflict** – “key to the movement of the story and is what qualifies a work as a play”

4 **Language** – “the dialogue used to create the thought, character, and plot”

Parts of language that are important to the play

Word choice in dialogue to create a sense of character

Word choice in dialogue to create conflict and complications

Dialect

Metaphors or symbolism

5 **Music or Song** – while not specifically referring to actual singing or musical instruments used during a production, this portion of a play also refers to the way that the dialogue sounds when spoken aloud.

Things to listen in dialogue

**Rhythm** – “regular and measurable repetition”

**Tempo** – how quickly dialogue is spoken

**Accent** – how loud dialogues is given and weather it is given in

**Staccato** short small pointed sections often very quick ideas

**Sustained** long drawn out sections often involved ideas

6 **Spectacle** – the visual elements of a play (according to Aristotle but has grown to include many other elements in modern production techniques including sound and smell)

Where to find keys to envisioning the spectacle of a play

stage directions

descriptive dialogue

subtext