

HOW TO DIRECT A STAGE READING

A stage reading is a key step in the development of a new play, and the ability to act in or direct a stage reading is an important skill for a theatre artist to master. Assuring that the contemporary theatre has a steady stream of new works is vital to the health of the theatre and the creative (and financial) lives of theatre artists. What you are about to do is very important and fun!

Things to keep in mind:

As a director, you will still do many of the script preparation tasks that you would do for a fully staged production. You will still:

1. Break the text into beats and units.
2. Signpost the structure of the dramatic action by identifying all of the points of clash where the conflict is engaged.
3. Conduct any necessary research regarding the historical context of the story and identify any unusual words, references, or allusions.
4. Analyze the characters and their relationships.
5. Consider the tempo/rhythm of the delivery of the text.
6. Attend to pace, timing, builds, pauses, and tone.
7. Keep a sharp ear attuned to the language and the actors' delivery of the language.
8. Build a rehearsal schedule.

You also will do some specialized things.

1. Decide how the stools and music stands will be arranged. You will want to consider the overall configuration (horseshoe, straight line, chevron, etc.) and where each character will be positioned relative to any considerations of tension or relationship that you feel would benefit from distance or proximity. It will help the actors if they can see and hear one another clearly. The actors will not be playing moments face to face, so they do not need to be able to look one another in the eye, but they will be aided by being able to look up out of the script to make connections with one another at will.
2. Sit or stand? Stools are best if you want your actors to sit, as they prevent actors from sinking all of their weight into gravity and collapsing the necessary tension of obstacles and resistance. If you don't have stools, try to use straight backed and flat seat chairs, as sloped seats and backs devour the actors. If your play is relatively short, you might just choose to ask the actors to stand, which will keep them alert and more activated than seated. You might also choose to have the company sit, but each actor rise in place to read when they enter a scene and then sit again when they exit the scene—you need to be careful with this choice, though, as it could start to look like a bunch of jack-in-the-boxes if you have a cinematic text with lots of scenes and lots of entrances and exits.
3. Physically shaping scenes: Depending on the structure of beats and scenes, you can signal starts and ends by having actors rise or sit simultaneously or shift out of a neutral seated position to "character" seated positions.

4. Physically scoring the text: You can have actors play their chairs or stools by sitting up, collapsing, sitting rigidly, lounging and slouching, leaning in or out, turning in or out, sitting formally or informally, and by generally physically expressing emotions and attitudes within the confines of the chair (actors should learn to do this regardless!). They also can achieve similar attitudes and emotions with physical shifts when standing, but you will not be staging crosses or blocking.
5. Vocally shaping the text: **This is your most important tool** and you need to help your actors to develop a keen sense of the play vocally. You will be like a sound engineer balancing volume, speed, pace, timing, pauses, builds, and decrescendos. You will need to be on your actors to be attentive to **keywording**—stressing operative words such as nouns and verbs. You will need to ride them to avoid **falling sentences**—sentences that vocally trail off toward the end due to lack of breath and intentional energy. English is constructed syntactically so that the impact of the idea is toward the end of the sentence, but American speech patterns tend to fall off at the ends of sentences, which undermine the information, meaning, and intention of the sentence. You also will need to help them to find and play into **builds, topping, undercuts, beat climaxes, and to allow characters to make discoveries**. Lacking the ability to physically score these choices, actors can sometimes get a bit flat (which often is why first read-throughs are so lack luster).

How to rehearse: 10 hours.

1. First Read-Through. At this reading, you will need to contextualize the play for the actors. Provide them any information you can that will get them to understand the meaning and the context quickly. Provide them with any references they might need, such as a glossary of unusual words, allusions, or references.
2. Straight read. Let the actors read the play from start to finish. Encourage them to read it with animation and imagination. Do not let them read it like a biology textbook.
3. Table work read. This is a slower read where you stop and go to signpost beat changes, points of clash, character notes, dynamics, and any other special notes. This also is where you are listening to see where you might predict any areas that you are going to have to work a bit more than you might have anticipated or where you can release time on scenes you thought might take more time. Avoid going over and over moments to “get them right” at this stage. You are laying in the direction at this point and the actors need to go home and work on their parts with those direction notes in mind.
4. Working rehearsal. If the play allows for it, you will have broken it out into some units of rehearsal, so that you can call the actors in specific scenes in order to work more closely and without calling the whole cast to sit while you do close work with one or two actors. This is where you can do stop and go and repeat. Be very careful about falling into the trap of trying to get performance ready reads on moments, or you will lose time. Actors need time for notes to gel and whole performances to come together. Be sure they understand the nuance and where the moments are headed and move on.
5. “Stumble Through Read:” This is like a staged production stumble through in that it is the first time that you will read the whole script after having done stop and

go spot work. Take notes and avoid stopping the reading. The actors need to get the feel of the whole play. Be sure that your notes are specific and direct. Tell them precisely where to pick up the pace, slow down, get louder, get softer, pause, color a word or phrase, physically adjust, etc. Don't get philosophical.

6. Final reads. They will read the play through and you will give notes. If something is going particularly wonky, take a note and run that moment again after the read.

For “Minimally Staged Readings” (or “Staged” Readings)

The emphasis is on “minimally.” Your staging is employed to clarify relationships, beat structure, and to point key moments. This is very different from fully staging a play, as you will not be carefully scoring the psychological arc of the play with subtle compositions and stage pictures or the emotional arc of the characters with nuanced psychologically motivated blocking. This is not to say that you should not attend to composition, as you will need to do so, since the actors will be on their feet in scenes. You will still need to work with the picture on the stage, but will not continually be shifting it. The goal is to block with broad brushstrokes instead of refined brushstrokes. Do not get caught up in realistic entrances and exits to “other parts of the house” as consistently represented by one side of the stage or the other. It will get out of hand quickly, as you likely will only have SL and SR as options. You will be able to use acting blocks for necessary furniture, but do not get caught up in props and set dressing. If there is a key prop, use it, but don't try to supply props as though this were a fully produced play.

Your actors will still be carrying scripts and this will still be a reading. You will need to help them to pay particular attention to the beginnings and endings of beats, beat climaxes, and key moments of pursuit or retreat. That means that they will need to be very familiar with the language at those moments, as they likely will need to come up out of the scripts to make eye contact at those moments. Being familiar is not the same as being memorized.

Light cues will be lights up and lights down and the stage will be lit only with a general wash.

You will decide on your optimal stage configuration even though you do not have a ground plan and the stage is not divided into isolated locations. If the play requires a character to be in isolation from the others, you can dedicate a specific quadrant of the stage to that, but remember that you will be losing that quadrant for all of the action. There are several ways to configure the playing space. Ultimately, the arrangement of the chairs defines and frames the playing space. You likely will not use music stands other than for the reader for the stage directions.

1. Actors lined up across the rear, seated left and right facing the action, or seated in a horizontal line parallel to the audience.
2. You will not have a ground plan, but you will consider which side of the “action” you need characters to enter or exit.
3. Actors will make eye contact and generally relate to one another.

4. You will stage crosses to and away to convey *significant* shifts in the builds, but avoid micro blocking to score every escalation, or it will get too busy. The actors will convey the internal nuances within beats vocally. Save your crosses and movement for key moments.
5. You will need to attend to where you exit characters from the action in order to bring them on appropriately in their next moments.
6. **KEEP THIS STAGING SIMPLE OR IT WILL BECOME TOO COMPLICATED FOR ACTORS TO REMEMBER IN THE TIME THAT YOU HAVE TO REHEARSE.**

A word about props, sound, or costumes:

Equity does not allow either, generally. But there are times when a moment just cannot be made clear without that visual or aural assist. If you have one of those instances, talk to the producer. Sometimes, a sound effect can be provided by the actors i.e. the actors hum to create the sound of a car engine, or clap to create the sound of birds lifting off, or a baby crying in the background, or sing a snatch of a song (included in the text and for which rights have been obtained if it is published).

Stage Directions:

You likely will want to place the reader on the stage, but a bit off to the side of the action. This person should be able to see the other actors clearly and be viewed by the audience as part of the overall reading.

The reader should participate in every rehearsal so that the actors and you are able to fully incorporate the reading of stage directions into the general pace and rhythm of the play.

You will need to decide which stage directions need to be read aloud and if you need to add any for clarification. The reader should be clear and interesting and not sound like they are reading the phone book. In some instances, you may need the reader to add story-telling nuance, such as reading suddenly and forcefully on “the door slams!” Do not read emotional descriptions—the actors should be able to make these clear.

Actors and Their Scripts:

The actors should all have their scripts in black notebooks (although tablets are starting to be used for readings). Turning pages can be distracting, so it may be helpful for actors to tab their scripts and know the scenes well enough to know when to turn a section instead of individual pages. The actors should keep their eyes focused on the action and not be reading along in the script. They direct energy to the action by watching it instead of sucking energy out of the action by reading their scripts.