

READING AND THINKING ABOUT PLAYS:
An Analytical Guide for Directors and Active Readers

First Impressions

Please note words/phrases, images, actions, internal and external conflicts, scenes that stimulate your imagination; patterns that you detect; analogies of all kinds; political, social and cultural responses. The best way to read a play is OUT LOUD!

The Play

1. **Story** of the play. A brief distillation of the narrative.
 - Can you describe the narrative in a sentence or two?
2. **Given circumstances.** Key indications provided by the author, such as period (time) and setting (place), relationships, environment, events/information preceding the beginning of the play or scene, unwritten scenes, and other relevant information in the text.
3. **Title** of the play. Literal and figurative meaning.
4. **Conventions.** What conventions are employed? Name those unique to the play. In *Mother Courage*, for example, Brecht uses song as a way of commenting on action and character.
5. **Major characters.** What is each character's greatest want and what do they do to achieve it? What is their greatest obstacle? List five key moments for each. (Include text revelations, function in play, name, status in relation to other characters).
6. **Main character.** Who and why? Not always easy to identify. The choice can have huge impact on how a director focuses the play.
7. **Genre.** What type of play is it? Does it deviate from the rules of a particular genre?
8. **Structure.** What *form* does the play take? Describe the plot. How does the plot impact meaning, suggest tempo or rhythm? Note French scenes (when a character enters or exits).
9. **Language.** Style (poetry or prose and for what purpose?). Pay attention to idioms, irony, subtext.
10. **Patterns:** Symbols, imagery, action, behavior (such as disparity between what a character says and does, etc.).
11. **Rhythm and mood.** Can apply to environment, character, structure, atmosphere, and other topics in this section.
12. **Theme.** What is the point of the play, the main idea being explored? What is the playwright saying about a particular subject through this play?
13. **Translation/Adaptation.** For directors, the choice of translation is crucial. Likewise, the nature of cuts that will shape a production.

ADDITIONAL AREAS ESSENTIAL FOR THE DIRECTOR AND THE CURIOUS READER TO CONSIDER:

Research

14. **Playwright.** Where does this play fit into his/her canon? What other information about the playwright or play, such as previous productions, is relevant to your preparation?
15. **World of the play.** What rules govern it? This research grows out of given circumstances – period influences, political and cultural landscape, socio-economic factors, to name a few examples.
16. **Non-literary research.** Music, film, painting, photography, etc.
17. **Other materials.** Include at least one non-theatrical source that has influenced your thinking about directing the play.

Directing the play

18. **Concept.** How do you envision the play and what do you want to accomplish in a production? Is there a *metaphor* or *organizing image* that captures the psychic and/or physical space as you envision it?
 - Include any personal *images or impressions* that triggered or inspired your thinking?
 - What political, social, and/or cultural issues do you intend to explore?
 - What do you, as director, bring to a production of the play and why is it important that you direct the play at this particular time?
20. **Style.** *How* will you direct the play?
 - What conventions, other than those provided by the playwright, will you employ?
 - What approach to speech and voice, movement and gesture will you use?
 - Describe your staging ideas, use of music, objects and other performance elements that will determine the style of your production.
 - How do your stylistic choices related to period and place?
21. **Design.** Describe your ideas and goals regarding the design of your production.
 - How has the play influenced your choice of theatre configuration. Or conversely, has your approach to design been affected by the physical theatre where it will be staged?
 - What design choices have guided your thinking?
 - Include at least *ten visuals*, either in single or collage form.
 - Complete correctly scaled *groundplans* for every scene.

Reflections on conflict:

Conflict is a critical tool that all writers (and directors) consider and analyze. Even when it is unmentioned, it applies to **every** category in the above outline. It is the heart of what makes an interesting/complex character and a dynamic play. The root of conflict may exist outside a scene or inside it. In a practical sense, conflict is often synonymous with the obstacle to the action. Drama is like chess in that we know from the beginning what role conflict will play, but it's the tactics used in its service that fascinate us. Conflict can be subtle or overt, but identifying it is the key to unlocking the door to a scene and a play. Yes, the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet is romantic but its richest, most complex moments are steeped in conflict.