

Script Analysis

Generally speaking, you will read a script several times while working on it. The first time you read the script, try to read it in one sitting. Don't focus on analyzing it—just take in the story and imagine it as an audience member might. Pay attention to your reactions. What excites you? Surprises you? Then, on subsequent readings, you will begin to analyze the script in more depth. While the following sections are sorted by complexity, even advanced drama clubs will take the previous sections into account as they work on a play.

NASCENT

Script analysis often starts with identifying the “given circumstances,” or the characteristics of the world of the play explicitly or implicitly found in the script. These given circumstances place the action of the play in context for actors, designers, and audience members. Some of these are clarified in stage directions, while others are inferred from characters' lines. As you reread the script, identify each of the following:

- **Time:** The specific time the scene takes place. Time of day, time of week, time of year. For example, how would a scene that takes place in the middle of a winter night compare to a scene that takes place on a hot afternoon minutes before summer vacation?
- **Period:** The general or historical time period in which the play is set (e.g., the Dark Ages, the 1950s, or in the faraway future.) How might the period influence the dialogue? How might the costumes or set pieces reflect the period?
- **Place:** The specific place on stage where the action occurs. (e.g., a fancy living room, a sterile doctor's office, or a ravaged battle field). Is it an interior or exterior location? What sort of set pieces could suggest the place for the audience? How would characters feel or behave in this place compared to other places?
- **Locale:** The general region where the play is set (e.g., New York City, the rural American South, under the sea.) What makes this locale unique compared to other locales?
- **Mood:** The atmosphere, or feeling of a scene. (e.g., suspenseful, humorous, chaotic) What about the scene causes this mood? *Caution: Avoid having actors “play the mood,” but instead focus on their objective. For example, many humorous scenes are funny because characters are not getting what they want. The humor of the scene rings more authentically when the actors are not focused on “being funny,” but are focused on their character's objective in the scene.*
- **Theme:** What ideas does this play make you think about? Does it have a question that it sets out to answer or explore? How do the events of the play develop these ideas?

Once you have identified the given circumstances, keep them in mind as you work on scenes. How might they influence what happens in a scene? Do they change from scene to scene or stay constant throughout the play? How can you communicate these ideas through the actors, the costumes, and the set pieces?

► NASCENT ACTIVITY

For this activity, you'll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document:

- **Addendum 1:** Given Circumstances Worksheet

INTERMEDIATE

What distinguishes drama from other forms of writing is that it is made primarily of dialogue—characters speaking to each other (or to the audience), with some actions indicated through stage directions. Unlike prose, drama largely does not include narration, unless the playwright has included a narrator character. Because dialogue is the primary medium of drama, all dialogue should serve two purposes: revealing character and furthering the plot.

When analyzing a scene, it is helpful to think about it in terms of text, context, and subtext:

- **Text:** The actual words written by the playwright and spoken by the actors. As you analyze the text, look up any words, expressions, or references that are unfamiliar.
- **Context:** The situation surrounding the characters that influences the decisions they make. Where are the characters? Why are they there? Where were they before the beginning of this scene? Where are they going after this scene?

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- **Subtext:** The underlying meaning of what the characters say. For example, suppose a character says “Everything is fine.” The meaning, or subtext, of this phrase changes depending on their tone and body language. Are they being serious, or sarcastic? To look for the subtext within dialogue, consider what each character wants and what obstacles they face. Why do they say the words they do? Does it help them move toward their objectives?

Have the students each come up with their own context (Where are they? What specific task is Character B busy with? Where is Character A coming from? Where are they going and why?). Then have them determine what the subtext is for each character (E.g., Is Character A impatiently trying to hurry Character B, or trying to determine if Character B is feeling okay?) Have them perform for each other. After each little scene, ask the other students to try to identify the context and the subtext the actors created from their text. You may be surprised with how many different ways students can interpret the same text!

► INTERMEDIATE ACTIVITY

For this activity, you’ll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document:

- **Addendum 2:** Blank Scene Exercise
- **Addendum 4:** Sample Tactics

ADVANCED

All plays can be reduced to a few basic ideas: a character wants something, something hinders the character from achieving what they want, and the character tries different tactics to get what he or she wants. There may be all manner of variations on this formula, but all drama stems from conflict arising from characters pursuing what they want despite obstacles. As you reread the script, identify the following ideas:

- **Objective:** What the characters want or need within the given moment. It helps actors to frame their objective in statements beginning with “I want” or “I need.” All characters should have objectives — not just the protagonist!
- **Super-Objective:** The broad overall objective a character has throughout the play, rather than in specific scenes. For example, Hamlet’s super-objective is to avenge his father’s murder, but his objective changes in scenes throughout the play.
- **Obstacle:** The person, event, or thing that gets in the way of a character achieving his or her objective. Sometimes the obstacle is that two characters have exact opposite objectives. The obstacles are what create conflict within the story. Once an obstacle is overcome, a character gets a new objective, or the play is over.
- **Tactic:** An action a character makes in an attempt to achieve his or her objective. Tactics can be actual actions a character takes, or they can be spoken. For example, if a character’s objective is to make another character leave the room, the character’s tactics to achieve this objective can be anything between asking them politely to using physical force.
- **Beat Change:** The moment a character decides to switch tactics, or takes on a new objective. These can be subtle moments, or incredibly dramatic moments depending on the scene. Either way, it is important to make these beat changes clear. What causes the character to change tactics? What causes the character to change objectives?

Exercise: Focus in on a particular scene. Individual scenes can be thought of as miniature plays with their own story arc. How does the scene begin? How does the scene end? How does the playwright take us from A to B? Break the scene down into the components above. What characters are present? What are their objectives and obstacles? Try not to think of the rest of the play; only focus on what these characters want in the given moment. Then trace the tactics they use to work toward their objectives. By the end of the scene, do they achieve their objective, or find a new obstacle?

Exercise: Think of the entire play as a series of inevitable events caused by the choices characters make. Create an image in your mind for the beginning, middle, and end of the play (e.g., for Hamlet: a coronation feast, a play, a room with dead bodies.) How does the playwright move from the first image to the middle image, to the last? Then trace the protagonist’s journey in reverse. Starting with the resolution, determine what immediately caused that event. Then determine what caused that event. Work backwards in this way until to arrive at the circumstance that initiates the conflict at the beginning of the play.

➤ ADVANCED ACTIVITY

For this activity, you'll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document:

- **Addendum 3:** Sample Script Annotation
- **Addendum 4:** Sample Tactics

MUSICAL THEATRE

Musicals often have several scene changes, set in many different locations. While many “straight” plays also have this challenge, this is a challenge endemic to most musicals.

Start by breaking the play down into a list of scenes. Where does each scene take place? What is the passage of time from scene to scene? What practical problems do you notice (e.g., scene changes, quick costume changes, etc.) What patterns do you notice with how the scenes are ordered? Many musicals have a scene order that gives a stage crew the opportunity to change scenes more efficiently.

As an example, let's look at a breakdown for Act I of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*:

- **Act I Scene 1:** The Town
- **Act I Scene 2:** The Forest
- **Act I Scene 3:** The Castle Interior
- **Act I Scene 4:** Exterior of Belle's Cottage
- **Act I Scene 5:** The Castle Interior
- **Act I Scene 6:** The Tavern
- **Act I Scene 7:** Fireplace, in the Castle

In this example, the scenes that may require more complicated set pieces are the odd-numbered scenes (the castle, and the village). There are many potential ways to approach these scene changes, depending on the number of actors and/or crew members, as well as the physical limits of your performance space.

For example, a drama club performing on a stage with a curtain might close the curtain after the first scene. The action of the second scene would happen downstage of the curtain, with dim lighting and perhaps some potted trees suggesting the location of a forest. While this scene is going on, the town set pieces behind the curtain can be struck, and the castle set pieces be set in place.

Performance spaces without stage curtains to conceal scene changes would find other solutions, such as setting the castle on one side of the performance space, and the town on the other. The scenes would then alternate from one side of the space to the other. Find whatever solution works best for your space and your students; as long as you are efficient and consistent, your audience will “buy in” to what they are watching.

Songs as Scenes: You can apply all of the script analysis techniques and strategies in this chapter to individual musical numbers, approaching them as miniature scenes with sung dialogue (or, in the case of a solo, a sung monologue). Think of the given circumstances and how they establish the context of the song. What mood does the music create? How does the song serve to reveal a character's objectives or work toward achieving them?

➤ MUSICAL THEATRE ACTIVITY

For this activity, you'll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document:

- **Addendum 5:** Scene Tracking Sheet

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays by David Ball. 1983.

A very concise primer on script analysis, this book is often required reading in script analysis and directing classes. Ball illustrates his theories with examples, mainly using the text of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers by James Thomas. 1992.

An accessible, yet in-depth text exploring different approaches to script analysis. As the title suggests, this text shows how script analysis applies to the work of actors, directors, and designers.

WEB

Theatrefolk is a blog for theatre educators, with many free resources that can be used in both the classroom and the rehearsal room. www.theatrefolk.com/blog/script-analysis-actors-five-steps-building-foundation

ADDENDUM 1: Given Circumstances Worksheet

Title of Play: _____

The given circumstances are the aspects of the world of the play that the script tells us. Sometimes the playwright tells us the given circumstances directly, other times the actors need to figure it out through close reading. The given circumstances should be clear to the audience to help them understand the context of what they are watching. After reading the script, answer the questions below.

Time

- What is the time of day for each scene?
- What is the time of year for each scene?

Period

- What is the year, or general time period in which the play takes place? (e.g., 1967, the present, the distant future)
- How do you know?

Place

- Where does the action take place? Describe it.
- Is the place inside or outdoors?
- What furniture pieces are needed?
- Are there any doors or windows needed?

Locale

- What is the general location of where the play takes place? (e.g., the Midwest, China, under the sea)
- How do you know?

Theme

- What ideas does the play make you think about?
- What do the main characters want above all else?
- Are there any actions, words, or ideas that appear throughout the script?
- What lesson does the audience learn by the end of the play?

Mood

- How does the play make you feel? Brainstorm adjectives and feeling words.

ADDENDUM 2: Blank Scene Exercise

TEXT, CONTEXT, AND SUBTEXT

The **text** of a scene is the words written in the script and spoken by the actors. The **context** of a scene is the situation the characters are in, or what is going on in the scene. The **subtext** of a scene is the underlying meaning of what a character says (for example, if a person says “Oh, how fun!” in a sarcastic tone, the subtext of the line is more along the lines of “This is boring.”).

The brief scene below can be interpreted many different ways. Read it with a partner, and complete the questions below before rehearsing the scene.

(CHARACTER B is busy with some task. CHARACTER A enters.)

CHARACTER A: Are you ready?

CHARACTER B: Just a second.

(CHARACTER B continues with the task for a moment.)

(CHARACTER A reacts. CHARACTER B finishes the task.)

CHARACTER B: Okay, let’s go. (They exit.)

Answer the questions below to determine the CONTEXT of this scene:

- Who are the characters? What is their relationship?
- Where are the characters?
- What task is Character B doing?
- Why does Character A come to get Character B? Where are they going?

Once you’ve determined the context, figure out how this would impact the SUBTEXT of what the characters say and do:

- What kind of tone would Character A use?
- How does Character A react when it takes Character B a moment to finish the task?
- What kind of tone would Character B use?
- How does Character B feel as s/he is working at the task?

ADDENDUM 3: Sample Script Annotation

SCRIPT ANNOTATION EXAMPLE

Below is an example of a script page that has been annotated for character notes. CHARACTER's **objective** for the scene has been written at the top of the page, as a constant reminder of what s/he wants from the other character in that scene. For each line, the actor notes what the **tactic** is that motivates them to say that line. Note that tactics are always written as active verbs that usually involve another character. See the next page for examples of strong and weak tactics. **Beats**, or changes in tactic, are marked with a “/”.

To help Tara with the party.

TARA

(Setting out snacks on a table)

I hope this will be enough. Do you think I got enough chips? I hope the salsa lasts; it always runs out first. Oh no! I didn't get barbecue chips! What if somebody wants barbecue chips?

BETH

(Opening a bag and helping herself to some chips)

I guess they'll have to disown you and you'll be the laughing stock of the school.

TARA

Oh my God. Do you think so?

BETH

/Girl. No. I was just messing with you. /Relax.

↳ to clarify

↳ to calm Tara

TARA

That's easy for you to say. It wasn't exactly easy pulling this off without mom noticing. *(Noticing the time.)* Oh no! People are gonna show up any minute now. Can you get a bowl for the chips and set everything out? I need to set out the pop.

BETH

(Opening cabinets and searching. Pulling out an ornate crystal punch bowl).

I can't find any regular bowls. Will this glass one work?

↳ To ask permission

TARA

No, my grandma gave that one to my mom before she passed. There are some plastic ones in the cupboard to the left of the stove. Use one of those.

(BETH goes to return the crystal bowl to the cupboard and it slips from her fingers. Loud crashing sound as it shatters.)

TARA

Beth! You— but—how could you—!

BETH

/Tara. I'm so, SO sorry. I / Maybe we can fix it?

↳ to calm Tara

↳ to reconcile

(Doorbell rings.)

ADDENDUM 4: Sample Tactics

STRONG AND WEAK TACTICS

Strong tactics are active verbs that show what a character DOES through their dialogue. Strong tactics are specific and usually involves another character in the scene. **Weak tactics** are more passive verbs (or start with “to be”) and do not involve other characters. Below are some examples of weak tactics and stronger alternatives.

WEAK	STRONG
To be angry	To scold
To not answer	To evade
To start a conversation	To flirt
To be scary	To scare
To feel happy	To celebrate
To give	To bribe
To be mean	To taunt

ADDENDUM 5: Scene Tracking Sheet

Scene Tracking Sheet Example

Show: _____

Page: _____

Use the tracking sheet to keep track of the given circumstances of each scene. Keeping track of the time helps not only with remembering the arc of the story line during rehearsals, it will help with decisions of how to light the scene. Note details about the location, including general style, any set pieces and where they will be located on the stage, and any changes that will occur during the scene.

SCENE	PAGES	TIME/WEATHER	LOCATION	NOTES
1	1 - 5	Summer, early afternoon, sunny	Interior living room, Bennie's house	Modest bachelor pad. Table and chairs SL, couch and fireplace DR, window UC, door SR. By end of scene, sunlight through window shifts from afternoon to early evening.
2	6 - 10	The same day, night time.	Same	Moonlight through UC window. Red glow of coals in the fireplace.
3	11 - 13	Two days later. Summer, morning, sunny.	Exterior café patio.	Italian café, metal table and chairs DC. Brick wall backdrop UC. Faint sound of birds chirping.
4	13 - 16	Later that night. Thunderstorms.	Interior living room, Bennie's house	Same as scene 2, but dark outside, with intermittent flashes of lighting through window. Sound of rain and thunder.
5	17 - 25	The next morning. Overcast.	Same	Same, but with tables and chair overturned. Debris of a break-in litters the floor. Early morning dawn through the window.