

DIRECTING THE HIGH SCHOOL PLAY - SCRIPT ANALYSIS



In the beginning, before the actors and the set and the blocking and the lights and sound and of course the audience, the director is alone with the play.

The One Who Knows

The script is chosen! What next? All forms of plays from the breeziest comedy to the absurd modern to the traditional classic benefit from some level of pre-rehearsal analysis.

In the professional world there are dramaturgs to do research, there are motivated actors who study their characters, there are stage managers to list the props. But in the high school play, **the director has to be the 'one in the know.'** That's really what I mean by script analysis—becoming the one who 'knows' the script inside-out and backwards.

Even if you're in a position to have students take care of some of these tasks, you'll still have to push them, be the adviser, still be the 'one in the know.'

For me, script analysis is always a great place to start. If I don't have a clear vision for the production, studying the script opens a lot of creative doors. When I analyze a script I'm looking for anything that's going to enhance the experience for all involved. Something that is going to help create a theatrical world.

What To Look For In The Script

Character Details: What are the character details in the script? What questions should students be able to answer about their characters? What does each character want? Do they get it? What changes happen to the characters? What do they sound like? What's their background? Are the character details plentiful or thin?

Story Details: What are the main plot points? Is the story logical or absurd? Are there plot holes? Are there moments in the play mentioned but not dramatized?

The Structure: What does the structure say about the play? For example: repeating dialogue, out-of-the-ordinary word usage, change in tenses. Is the structure trying to make a point? Reflect a certain genre or time period or location? Are there words that might be mispronounced or misunderstood?

The Conflict: What is the main conflict? How does each character react to the conflict?

Themes: Are they obvious? Subtle? More than one? Defining the themes will help you shape your vision for the play. How will the themes factor into the blocking patterns? Can you create pictures that demonstrate the themes? Is there a recurring symbol?

Images: What pictures come to mind when you read the play? What visuals can you create? Plays are more than just the words, they are about the images you can plant in the minds of the audience, the physical actions of the characters. Is there a dominant colour or texture?

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The Nitty Gritty: A list of props, sets, costumes specifically mentioned in the script. What do you absolutely need for the show?

Research: If there's a specific time period, a specific historical event, specific pop culture references, all of these things need to be researched. It will reflect acting choices, design choices, directing choices.

The Biggies: What is the big problem trying to be solved? What is the biggest action of the story? What is the biggest action of each character? What is the climax? The highest point? The lowest point?

A Small Discussion Of Beats

Beat: A single moment in the dramatic action of a scene. The actor has to take into account not only the physical action (character crosses the stage to pick up the phone) but the character action (what is the character doing to get what they want in the scene) and the emotional action (what emotions are in play). A beat has a beginning, middle and end. It can be as short as a couple of lines of dialogue or as long as a whole scene.

Depending on what kind of director you are, script analysis may include defining the 'beats' in each scene. Some directors are specific about outlining the beats, others not so much.

In my very limited high school theatre experience as a teenager I never heard of 'the beat.' No director ever had that discussion with me. In fact, I'll go so far to say that in my limited university theatre experience I didn't hear about 'beats' until my directing course. Even though I gradually became aware of them, as a director I've always focused on other elements.

Is it necessary to mark beats? Do students need to know about them? This depends on your own experiences as a director and the background of the students. If they've never heard of marking beats and you start down that path it won't end well. It's easy to get confused. Because everyone's interpretation of a script can be different, beats can differ.

Of course you can introduce students to something new, it can be a part of knowing your students' theatrical background and your goals for the production. Maybe you discuss the beats for one scene. If they've never done it before, they certainly shouldn't do it on their own.

How do I know when the beat's over? The beat's over when there's a change in the action (e.g. the characters turn to a new subject, someone enters or exits, a problem is solved, a new problem begins, a change in emotion).

How many beats do scenes have? There's no set answer. Anytime there's a change, there's a new beat.

Why are they important? It's important for directors and actors to be on the same page when it comes to the rhythm and pace of a scene, and of the play as a whole. Marking beats helps to define the climax, and to know the action for each act, each scene, each moment.

How do I mark beats in the script? Slashes, brackets, stars – whatever works for you. Just be consistent.