



From the AACT Resource Library

An Introduction to Stage Direction

Stage direction is one of the most crucial elements in bringing a play to life. Mastering its subtleties is what separates an engaging, believable production from an awkward, unrealistic one.

It begins with the guidance provided in the script by the playwright about how the actors should move and deliver their lines on stage. These stage directions set the tone, mood, and physicality of each scene. They suggest how the director and actors can work to fulfill the playwright's vision for the performance. Detailed stage directions may also describe the staging, props, lighting, sound effects, and other elements that contribute to the overall atmosphere.

That said, every production is shaped by the theatre space itself, sets and lighting, the actors, and, most importantly, the director's own vision for the production.

The Director's Role

The director is responsible for interpreting the script and guiding the artistic vision of a production. They choreograph blocking, movement, and character interactions to shape the audience's emotional experience, conveying meaning and bringing the writer's ideas to life.

Key responsibilities of the director include:

- Analyzing the script to understand story, themes, characters, and the writer's intent.
- Casting actors that fit each role and eliciting powerful performances. The director coaches actors on motivation, relationships, and subtext.
- Collaborating with designers to create a unified aesthetic for sets, lighting, costumes, and sound. The director approves design choices to match their vision.
- Blocking scenes and choreographing movement to punctuate dramatic moments. The director uses the stage space to highlight power dynamics and relationships between characters.
- Controlling pacing and emphasis to modulate the audience's emotional journey. The director may adjust the delivery pace or staging in certain scenes.

- Unifying all elements of production to realize a compelling artistic vision. The director ensures consistency across acting, design, and technical elements.

Through insightful interpretation and creative stagecraft, the director brings the production to life using strategic stage direction. Their vision shapes the audience's understanding and experience of the play.

Blocking

Blocking refers to the precise movement and positioning of actors on a stage during a performance. It is one of the most important jobs of a director to plan and direct blocking during the rehearsal process.

Blocking serves several key purposes:

- It ensures actors hit their marks and are in the right positions for the audience to see key moments and interactions. Missing a mark can ruin the illusion or impact of a scene.
- It facilitates the smooth flow of movement and action on stage. Poor blocking can make movement appear awkward.
- It establishes the relationships between characters based on their proximity and interactions. Subtle blocking choices can reinforce connections and power dynamics.
- It helps pace the show and transition between scenes or moments. Quick entrances and exits and smooth scene changes keep the energy up.

Directors will block scenes with the script and stage layout in mind. They determine entrances, exits, crosses, and movements that make sense spatially while serving the story. Blocking may go through multiple iterations as the director sees how it plays in rehearsal. Some tips for effective blocking include:

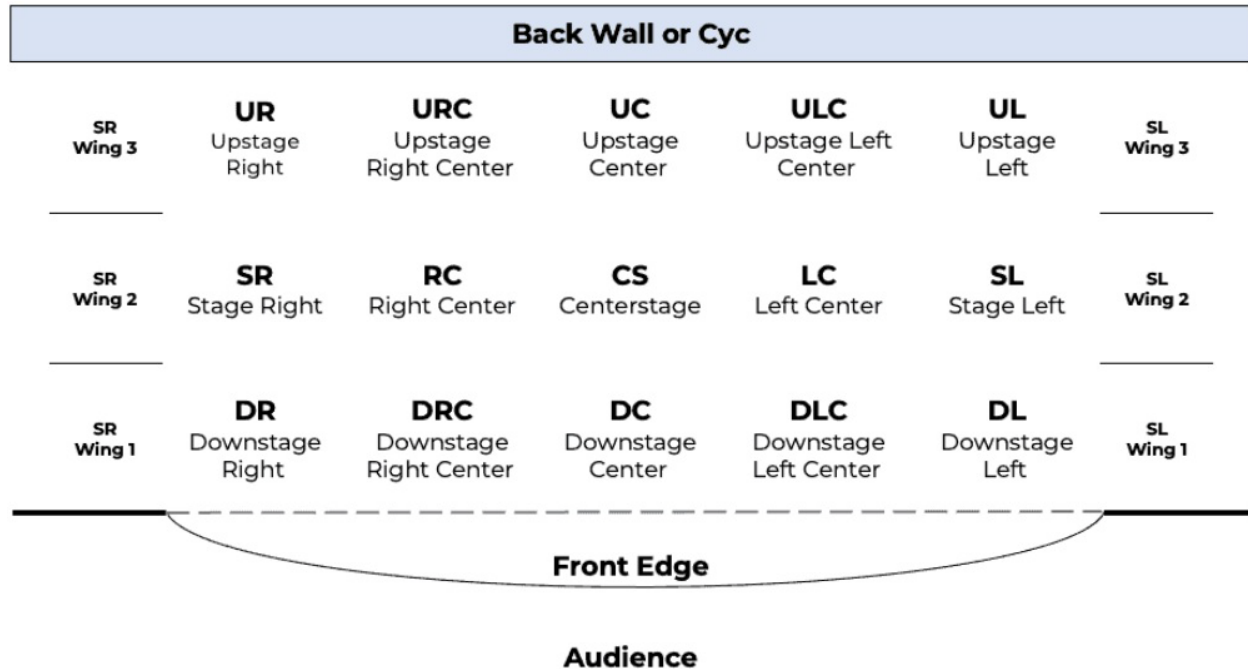
- Keep movement purposeful and motivated based on characters and story needs.
- Vary blocking to keep it visually interesting, while maintaining sightlines.
- Use levels, interactions, and proxemics to establish relationships.
- Allow actors freedom to interpret blocking and movements in character.
- Ensure actors understand their paths and spacing to avoid collisions.

Blocking is much more complex than just where actors stand and walk. It's an essential directorial skill that utilizes the stage to maximum dramatic effect.

Stage Positions

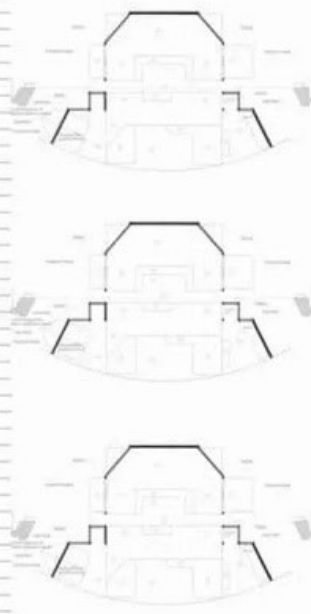
One of the most important aspects of stage direction is determining where actors should be positioned on stage during various scenes and moments. There are specific terms used to identify different parts of the stage:

- Downstage - The area at the front of the stage nearest to the audience
- Upstage - The area at the back of the stage furthest from the audience
- Stage Left - The left side of the stage from the actor's perspective facing the audience
- Stage Right - The right side of the stage from the actor's perspective facing the audience
- Center Stage - The middle area of the stage
- Wings - The sides of the stage out of view of the audience
- Offstage - Any area out of view of the audience



The director decides when actors enter from the wings, where they move during scenes, and how they utilize the space to convey relationships and meaning. For example, a director may position two characters downstage and close together to represent intimacy, while another character stands upstage and off to one side to seem more distant. Careful consideration of stage positions allows the director to block scenes to maximum dramatic and theatrical effect.

Many directors create a special version of the script, attaching the smaller script pages to 8.5x11" sheets of paper, put into a 3-ring binder. The director (or the director's assistant) makes notes in pencil to the side of the spoken lines where movement or placement is done, such as shown below. While this example includes a diagram of the stage area, simple notations are often enough.

<p>UNCW Department of Theatre TALLEY'S FOLLY</p> <p>a fever is who's getting a fever.</p> <p>SALLY They didn't want it.</p> <p>MATT But your dad insisted.</p> <p>SALLY He didn't want it either.</p> <p>MATT You were pale and white and would not look good in a wedding dress.</p> <p>SALLY Matt...</p> <p>MATT You were a tramp and a vamp and would have ruined the reputation of this prominent family. Is what the story is?</p> <p>SALLY He was the heir. He had to carry on the family name!</p> <p>MATT And you were irresponsible, you had uncontrollable kleptomania and could not be trusted around the family money.</p> <p>SALLY I was sick! I had a fever.</p> <p>MATT You were delicious and drunken and no family would allow such a woman to marry their only son.</p> <p>SALLY <i>(She tries to run past him.)</i> I was sick for a year.</p> <p>MATT <i>(Holds her again.)</i> You were not sick. You went away. Why did you go away?</p> <p>SALLY I was at the house.</p> <p>MATT <i>(Driving.)</i> Why were you at the house for a year?</p> <p>SALLY I had a fever.</p> <p>MATT No. Because you had disgraced yourself.</p> <p>SALLY I had a pelvic infection.</p> <p>MATT Is that what you told people?</p> <p>SALLY They didn't know what was wrong with me.</p> <p>MATT Why were you hiding in the house?</p> <p>SALLY They couldn't get the fever down!</p> <p>MATT Why were you hiding?</p> <p>SALLY <i>(Hitting him.)</i> They couldn't break the fever! By the time they did, it didn't matter.</p> <p>MATT What were you hiding...</p> <p>SALLY Because it had eaten out my insides! I couldn't bear children. I can't have children! Let go of me. <i>(She breaks away, crying, falls against something, and hits.)</i></p> <p>MATT What do you mean?</p> <p>SALLY I couldn't have children.</p> <p>MATT Sally, I'm here, you're okay. It's okay.</p> <p>49</p>	<p>TALLEY'S FOLLY</p> 
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Script pages on left, blocking slip sheet on right.

Setting the Scene

Begin with the stage directions in the script. They are a critical tool for setting the scene and conveying visual elements to the reader. The playwright uses stage directions to describe the set design, lighting, and props in detail.

For set design, stage directions indicate the location such as "a park bench" or "inside a castle." The playwright specifies furniture, walls, doors, and other set pieces. Stage directions also describe the overall look and feel of the set such as a "minimalist living room" or "a child's whimsical bedroom."

Props are called out directly in stage directions, as well. The playwright lists objects actors interact with like "a glass of wine" or "a letter." Details about the prop's appearance, size, color, and condition are useful. The more descriptive the stage direction, the easier it is for the props department to source the correct items, should you choose to go with the playwright's suggestions.

Lighting is used to establish time of day, location, mood and more. The playwright uses stage directions to indicate lighting effects like "a dark gloomy evening" or "soft morning light filters through the window." The lighting designer analyzes these directions, deciding which instruments, gels, angles, and intensities to use. The director and designer collaborate to bring the playwright's vision to life.

Costumes for the characters play an important role, as well. What the character wears can signal their economic status, personality, profession, and much more. While costume notes are not always defined in the original script, they need to be taken into consideration. For example, a woman wearing a dress with a long train may need extra time to enter the stage, to seat herself, or to climb steps. Work closely with the costume designer to make sure that costumes convey what you believe is necessary to support the author's (and your) vision.

The director's detailed stage directions entered into the working script allow them and designers to vividly imagine the world of the play. They function as a way to establish your particular vision of the play—and the theatre space and budget you have. They also function as a record of what has been done, making the annotated script an essential reference document.

Sound and Music

Incorporating sound effects and music can be a powerful way to enhance the emotional impact of a scene or dramatic moment in a play. As a director, you can write sound and music cues directly into your script. This allows you to work out timing and guide the sound designer.

When writing directions for sound, be specific about volume, duration, and emotional tone. Consider rhythm as well - speed up the action with rapid, jarring sound effects, or slow it down with drawn-out notes.

Well-placed music and sound effects can build tension, surprise the audience, and dramatically punctuate pivotal scenes. As director, experiment with incorporating audio elements that enhance the overall theatrical experience.

Conveying Emotion

Stage directions provide crucial guidance for actors on how to perform each scene and convey the intended emotions. They help make the characters' inner feelings tangible and relatable. Rather than vaguely telling actors to be "sad" or "angry," good stage directions get more specific about the emotion's context, intensity, and physicality. Use them as a starting point in how you wish to convey not only the emotions of the characters, but the emotions you want the audience to experience.

Some tips for conveying emotion through stage direction:

- Contextualize the feeling - Don't just say a character is "afraid." Explain what is making them afraid based on the story. Ex: "Jillian hesitates by the door, afraid to walk into the party alone."
- Vary the intensity - Convey a range from subtle to strong emotions. Example: "Todd shakes his head angrily" vs. "Todd slams his fist on the table, face red with rage."
- Describe physicality - Use body language and actions to show the emotion. Example: "Lisa's eyes fill with tears" or "Tyler shrinks back nervously."
- Set the pace - Draw out the emotion with slow, deliberate stage directions or make it quick like a burst of anger.
- Use comparisons - Similes and metaphors help convey strong sensory context for the emotion. Example: "She trembles like a fallen leaf."
- Tap into sensations - Describe chills, blushing, goosebumps, muscle tension, etc. to help actors embody the feelings.
- Consider motivation - What reason or experience drives the character's emotional state in the scene?

By crafting emotionally evocative stage directions, you help your actors connect to motivation and subtext. In turn, audience members get to deeply experience the story's emotional arcs. Specificity and vivid details are key to translating feelings from the page to the stage.

Rehearsal Techniques for Effective Stage Direction

Rehearsals are the backbone of any successful theatrical production. They provide the space and time for actors, directors, and designers to explore the intricacies of the script and bring stage directions to life. Effective rehearsal techniques can make or break the delivery of stage directions, ensuring that movements and emotions come across as genuine and impactful.

The director coaches the actors through all elements of their performance, including stage direction. Blocking is planned out collaboratively to suit the actors' movements and abilities. The director guides emotional delivery and pacing to evoke the desired audience response. Allow actors input, but keep them reigned into your cohesive vision. Be open to creative

solutions they devise for staging difficulties. Treat actors with respect, and they'll trust your direction.

Foster collaboration by allowing time for table reads and discussions. Challenging an actor's choices should be done privately to avoid undermining them. Actors want to fulfill their potential, so directing with insight helps elevate their performance.

Table Reads and Script Analysis

As the name suggests, the actors and director gather around a large table and read through the script. This gives the cast an initial understanding of the script and the director's vision for the production. The process allows actors to familiarize themselves with their characters and form initial interpretations of their lines and movements. They also get to know their fellow actors, and begin the bonding process essential to a theatrical team.



Blocking Rehearsals: These rehearsals focus on the movement and positioning of actors on stage. Rehearsing the blocking helps actors internalize their marks, understand spatial relationships, and practice interacting with props and set pieces.

Run-Throughs: Whether for a full act, or the entire show, a run-through helps identify issues in staging, timing, and execution of stage directions. These rehearsals are essential for fine-tuning the production and ensuring smooth transitions between scenes.



Technical Rehearsals: These focus on integrating technical elements such as sets, props, lighting, sound, and special effects with the actors' movements and stage directions. Usually done about a week before opening (along with costumes), these ensure that these elements are synchronized to create a cohesive performance.



Feedback: Constructive feedback throughout the rehearsal period is crucial for refining performances. Directors provide notes on how actors can better execute stage directions, adjust their blocking, and enhance their emotional delivery.

Pacing and Rhythm

The pace of a play can make or break the audience's engagement and experience. As a director, you have a lot of control over pacing through effective stage direction. Consider the pace and rhythm of each scene, transition, and the play as a whole.

- Don't let things drag or rush too quickly. Use stage direction strategically to speed up or slow down the action.
- You can pick up the pace with quick entrances and exits or interruptions.
- Slow things down by inserting pauses, silent reactions, or longer transition times between scenes.
- Vary the pace to build dramatic tension and provide release.
- Recognize climactic moments that need to flow rapidly.
- You can also use sound, lighting, and staging to influence pace and rhythm.

Finding the right tempo is key to captivating the audience. Make conscious choices with pacing to shape the dramatic arc and keep viewers invested from start to finish. The right rhythm resonates on an emotional level.

Collaborating

Staging a play or musical is a team effort. The director must collaborate closely with the designers, cast and crew to bring the script to life. Though the director holds the vision for the production, it is realized through collaboration and compromise.

While blocking and line readings can be changed as late as final dress and technical rehearsals, sets, lights, sound, props and costumes must be set early in the process. That's why it's important to bring designers and crew into the process as early as possible. A costume designer cannot be working in pastels, while the set designer is working in earth tones, for example.

(And yes, it *has* happened.) It's the director's job to communicate their vision for the production to everyone involved, and to work closely with everyone involved in the production to make sure that vision is supported.

Resources for Learning & Implementing Stage Direction

Stage direction is a complex craft that requires extensive study and practice. Here are some of the best resources for aspiring directors looking to hone their skills:

Books

- [The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre](#) by Katie Mitchell - An in-depth examination of the director's process, from text analysis to opening night. Includes exercises and checklists.
- [Creative Play Direction](#) by Robert Cohen - A classic handbook covering all aspects of directing, from working with actors to design collaboration.
- [Carver's Manual on Community Theatre Directing: A Step-By-Step Approach](#), by James C Carver This book has the information many directors wish they'd had when they began The author has long experience in community theatre, and understands the limitations inherent in staging a play with volunteers, and making do with what you have.
- [Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays](#), by David Ball. The classic is full of tools to use as you investigate plot, character, theme, exposition, imagery, conflict, theatricality, and the other crucial parts of the superstructure of a play. Also included are guides for discovering what the playwright considers a play's most important elements, thus permitting interpretation based on the foundation of the play rather than its details.
- [The Viewpoints Book](#) by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau - A guide to the Viewpoints improvisational and ensemble-building techniques.

Courses

- Many colleges and universities offer degree programs or individual classes in stage directing. These provide hands-on experience with student actors.
- Some theater companies host directing workshops and masterclasses.
- Online courses at sites like [Udemy](#) and [The Barrow Group](#) teach directing fundamentals through video lessons.

Apps for theater

- Digital script annotation tools like [ProductionPro](#) and [StageWrite](#) streamline collaborating with actors and designers.

- Stopwatch apps help directors time scenes and plan pacing during rehearsals. One popular choice is [Show Stopwatch](#).
- Prompt book apps organize all cues, notes, and blocking in one place for the director and stage manager. These include Stage Write and Show Stopwatch (above), as well as [Cue to Cue](#) (shown below), [PromptPad](#), and others. These function as digital versions of a traditional prompt book, allowing users to annotate scripts, track cues, manage blocking, and organize production details all within a digital interface on a tablet or smart phone.



The resources above are invaluable for developing the diverse skills stage directors require, from technical knowledge to storytelling artistry. Aspiring directors should avail themselves of books, courses, and software to be able to direct productions with confidence and vision.