

5 Tips to Help You Read a Play Script

Build the stage in your mind so the play comes to life

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What is the best way to go about reading dramatic literature? It can be challenging at first because you might feel like you're reading a set of instructions-most plays are made up of dialogue along with cold, calculating stage directions.

Dramatic literature presents several challenges, making the reading experience different than that of poetry or fiction. Yet, a play can be a moving literary experience. Here are some tips to make the most out of reading a play.

Read With a Pencil

Mortimer Adler wrote a terrific essay titled "How to Mark a Book." To truly embrace the text, Adler believes the reader should jot down notes, reactions, and questions directly onto the page or in a journal.

Readers who record their reactions as they read are more likely to remember the characters and various subplots of the play. Best of all, they are more likely to actively participate in class discussion and ultimately earn a better grade.

Of course, if you are borrowing a book, you will not want to write in the margins. Instead, make your notes in a notebook or journal, and use scenes or acts to keep your notes organized.

Whether you're writing notes in the book or in a journal, leave extra space for additional impressions as you read through the play each time.

Visualize the Characters

Unlike fiction, a play does not typically offer a lot of vivid detail. It is common for a playwright to briefly describe a character as he or she enters the stage. After that point, the characters may never be described again.

Therefore, it is up to you to create a lasting mental image. What does this person look like? How do they sound? How do they deliver each line?

Because people often relate more to movies than literature, it might be fun to mentally cast contemporary actors into the roles. Which current movie star would be best to play Macbeth? Helen Keller? Don Quixote?

Contemplate the Setting

High school and college English teachers select plays that have stood the test of time. Because many classic dramas are set in a wide range of different eras, it will behoove readers to have a clear understanding of the story's time and place.

For one, try to imagine the sets and costumes as you read. Consider whether or not the historical context is important to the story.

Sometimes the setting of a play seems like a flexible backdrop. For example, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" takes place in the mythological age of Athens, Greece. Yet most productions ignore this, choosing to set the play in a different era, usually Elizabethan England.

In other cases, such as in "A Streetcar Named Desire," the setting of the play is vitally important. In this case, it is the French Quarter of New Orleans shortly after the end of World War II. You can envision this quite vividly while reading the play.

Research the Historical Context

If the time and place is an essential component, students should learn more about the historic details. Some plays can only be understood when the context is evaluated. For instance:

The play adaptation of "To Kill a Mockingbird" takes place in the tumultuous deep South during the 1930s.

Tom Stoppard's "The Invention of Love" deals with the social constraints and academic struggles during England's Victorian Period.

Without knowledge of the historical context, much of the significance of these stories could be lost. With a little bit of research into the past, you can generate a new level of appreciation for the plays you're studying.

Sit in the Director's Chair

Here comes the truly fun part. To visualize the play, think like a director.

Some playwrights provide a great deal of specific movement. However, most writers leave that business to the cast and crew. What are those characters doing? Imagine the different possibilities. Does the protagonist rant and rave? Or do they remain eerily calm, delivering the lines with an icy gaze? You can make those interpretive choices.

It will help if you read through the play once and write down your first impressions. On the second reading, add the details: What color hair does your actor have? What style of dress? Is there wallpaper on the wall of the room? What color is the sofa? What size is the table?

Remember, to appreciate the dramatic literature, you must imagine the cast, the set, and the movements. The more detailed the image becomes in your head, the more the play comes to life on the page.