

How to Block a Play and Give Stage Directions

Play Blocking and Stage Directions

Flynn, Rosalind. "Play Blocking and Stage Directions." ThoughtCo, Feb. 11, 2020, [thoughtco.com/blocking-a-play-2713052](https://www.thoughtco.com/blocking-a-play-2713052).

Blocking is the theater term for the actors' movements on the stage during the performance of the play or the musical. Every move that an actor makes (walking across the stage, climbing stairs, sitting in a chair, falling to the floor, getting down on bended knee) falls under the larger term "blocking."

Who 'Blocks'?

Typically, the play's director determines the actors' movements and positions on stage. Some directors "pre-block" scenes—map out the actors' movements outside of rehearsal and then give the actors their blocking. Some directors work with the actors during rehearsal and make blocking decisions by having the actors perform the movements. These directors try a variety of movements and stage positions to see what works, make adjustments, and then set the blocking. Other directors, especially when they work with experienced actors during rehearsals, ask the actors to follow their instincts about when to move and the blocking becomes a collaborative work.

Playwrights May Provide Blocking

In some plays, the playwright provides blocking notes in the text of the script. American playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote detailed stage directions that include not only movements but notes on the characters' attitudes and emotions as well.

An example from Act I Scene 1 of "Long Day's Journey Into Night." Edmund's dialogue is accompanied by stage directions in italics:

EDMUND

With sudden nervous exasperation.

O for God's sake, Papa. If you're starting that stuff again, I'll beat it.

He jumps up.

I left my book upstairs anyway.

He goes to the front parlor saying disgustedly,

God, Papa, I think you'd get sick of hearing yourself.

He disappears. Tyrone looks after him angrily.

Some directors remain true to the stage directions provided by the playwright in the script, but directors and actors are not bound to follow those directions in the way that they are bound to use the playwright's dialogue strictly as written. The words the actors speak must be delivered precisely as they appear in the script. Only with the playwright's specific permission may lines of dialogue be changed or omitted. It is not imperative, however, to adhere to the playwright's blocking ideas. Actors and directors are free to make their own movement choices.

Some directors appreciate scripts with detailed stage directions. Other directors prefer scripts with little to no blocking ideas within the text.

Basic Functions of Blocking

Ideally, blocking should enhance the story on the stage by:

- Reflecting the authentic behavior of the characters—a character's movements can reveal just as much and sometimes more than his or her words do.
- Reflecting the relationships between and among characters.
- Giving the focus to certain characters at appropriate moments (helping the audience know where to look.)
- Allowing the audience to see what they are supposed to see and not what is meant to be hidden—either as part of the play or an accidental peek backstage.
- Creating effective stage pictures—strong, pleasing, horrific—that convey the meanings and moods of the play.
- Making effective use of the set.

Blocking Notation

Once a scene has been blocked, the actors must execute the same movements during rehearsals and performances. Thus, actors must memorize their blocking as well as their lines. During blocking rehearsals, most actors use a pencil to note blocking in their scripts—so if the blocking changes, the pencil marks can be erased and the new blocking noted.

Actors and directors use a “shorthand” for blocking notation. Rather than write out “Walk downstage right and stand behind (or upstage) the sofa,” however, an actor would make notes using abbreviations. Any stage movement from one area of the stage to another is called a “cross,” and a quick way to indicate cross is to use an “X.” So, an actor's blocking note the above blocking could look like this: “XDR to US of sofa.”