

Stage Directions for Actors: The Basics

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Every play has some degree of stage direction written into the script. Stage directions serve many functions, but their primary purpose is to guide actors' movements on the stage, called blocking.

These notations in the script, written by the playwright and set aside with brackets, tell the actors where to sit, stand, move about, enter, and exit. Stage directions also can be used to tell an actor how to shape his or her performance. They may describe how the character behaves physically or mentally and are often used by the playwright to guide the play's emotional tone. Some scripts also contain notations on lighting, music, and sound effects.

Defining Common Stage Directions

Stage directions are written from the perspective of the actor facing the audience. An actor who turns to his or her right is moving stage right, while an actor who turns to his or her left is moving stage left.

The front of the stage, called downstage, is the end closest to the audience. The rear of the stage, called upstage, is behind the actor's back, furthest from the audience. These terms come from the structure of stages in the Middle Ages and early modern period, which were built on an upward slope away from the audience to improve viewer visibility. "Upstage" refers to the section of the stage that was higher, while "downstage" refers to the area that was lower.

Stage Direction Abbreviations

From the rear of the stage to the audience, there are three zones: upstage, center stage, and downstage. These are each divided into three or five sections, depending on the size. If just three sections, there will be a center, left, and right in each. When in the center stage zone, right or left may be referred to simply as *stage right* and *stage left*, with only the very middle of the stage being referred to as *center stage*.

If the stage has been divided into 15 sections instead of nine, there will be a "left-center" and "right-center" in each section, for five possible locations in each of the three zones.

When you see stage directions in published plays, they are often in abbreviated form. Here's what they mean:

- C: Center
- D: Downstage
- DR: Downstage right
- DRC: Downstage right-center
- DC: Downstage center
- DLC: Downstage left-center
- DL: Downstage left
- R: Right
- RC: Right center
- L: Left
- LC: Left center
- U: Upstage
- UR: Upstage right
- URC: Upstage right-center
- UC: Upstage center
- ULC: Upstage left-center
- UL: Upstage left

Stage Direction Tips for Actors and Playwrights

Whether you're an actor, writer, or director, knowing how to use stage directions effectively will help you improve your craft. Here are some tips.

- **Make it short and sweet.** Stage directions are meant to guide performers. The best ones, therefore, are clear and concise and can be interpreted easily.
- **Consider motivation.** A script may tell an actor to walk quickly downstage center and little else. That's where a director and actor must work together to interpret this guidance in a manner that would seem appropriate for the character.
- **Practice makes perfect.** It takes time for a character's habits, sensibilities, and gestures to become natural, especially when they have been decided by someone else. Achieving this means lots of rehearsal time both alone and with other actors, as well as being willing to try different approaches when you hit a roadblock.
- **Directions are suggestions, not commands.** Stage directions are the playwright's chance to shape physical and emotional space through effective blocking. That said, directors and actors don't have to be faithful to stage directions if they think a different interpretation would be more effective.