



How to Read a Play

Reading a play is different from reading other kinds of literature because a play is different from other kinds of literature. Short stories, poems, novels, and so on are all complete on the printed page. But a printed play—also called a *script*—is not complete. It becomes complete when it is performed by actors for an audience. The play is what happens on the stage or screen.

Because of this, you—as reader—must bring a little more of yourself to reading a play. Of course you will bring your imagination, as you do to reading short stories and novels. And you will also make an effort to visualize the characters and actions, and to imagine their thoughts and emotions. What else can you do to help make your reading more complete and satisfying? Here are some tips.

Reading Tips

- Read the **stage directions**. (*They are often in parentheses and printed in italic type, like this.*) Stage directions are not meant for an audience; they are messages from the playwright to the people who stage the play. They may tell the actors when and where to move, what emotions to express, what props (hand-held objects, such as a newspaper or a coffee cup) to pick up and what to do with them. They may tell the director where to position the actors or what the overall mood of a scene should be. They may tell the designers what the set looks like, what costumes the actors should wear, what music or sounds are heard, or what time of day the lighting should suggest. Stage directions are usually not read aloud, even when the actors rehearse a show.

UR Upstage Right	UC Upstage Center	UL Upstage Left
R Right	C Center	L Left
DR Downstage Right	DC Downstage Center	DL Downstage Left

- Understand the **stage areas**. Stage directions often include abbreviations like *R* for *right* or *L* for *left*. (These mean the actors' right or left sides as they face the audience.) Other abbreviations are *U* for *upstage* or *D* for *downstage* or *C* for *center*. (*Downstage* means toward the audience; *up* and *down* are terms left over from the days when stages actually slanted.)
- Pay attention to the characters' names. They tell who says what speeches.
- Read the speeches aloud. They are, after all, meant to be heard. Read with as much feeling as you can, to get the most out of the speeches. Even if you're reading the play by yourself, you can play all the parts, changing your voice for the different characters. This will give you a better understanding of the characters, who they are and what they are doing.
- Look for a **subtext**. This is, simply, what the characters are thinking or feeling, and it is not always the same as what they are saying. For example, a character may say, "Of course I'll take my little sister to the movie, Dad," but actually be thinking, "How can you *do* this to me? What will my friends think?"

Theatre Conventions

A **convention** is an accepted way of doing things. The more plays you see on stage, the better you will understand the conventions, the things that make a play a play. Here are some common conventions.

Narrator Sometimes an actor will speak directly to the audience, to explain who the characters are or what is happening. Sometimes a character will speak directly to the audience and then go back to speaking to the other characters. When they do, they serve the function that a narrator serves in short stories or novels.

The "Fourth Wall" In realistic plays, the actors may behave as if the audience simply isn't there. It's as if the audience is eavesdropping on the action through an invisible "fourth wall" of a room, whether the set is actually an enclosed room or not.

Dramatic Time The time an action is supposed to take onstage isn't necessarily the time that same action would take in real life. For example, actors may take seven minutes to eat a meal that they would spend twenty-five minutes on in reality. Just accept what the play tells you about how much time has elapsed.

Lapses of Time If you go to the movies, you're probably familiar with the convention that several minutes or days or even years elapse from one scene to another. It's the same with plays—a curtain or change of lighting may suggest that any amount of time has passed. When you read a play, the stage directions will usually specify what is happening.

The World Offstage Actors are trained to keep in mind, when they enter or exit, just where it is they're supposed to be coming from or going to. This helps them create their characters more realistically. When you're reading a play, try to imagine the lives the characters are leading when they're not onstage. This will help you understand the characters and their subtexts better, and will give you a better understanding of the play as a whole.

Sharing the Experience

Seeing a play performed live onstage can be a truly thrilling experience. As a reader, you can share some of that thrill if you read attentively, with imagination, and if you try actively to enter into the world of the characters and of the play. In this book are many different kinds of plays in different styles from playwrights all over the world. Enjoy them.

