

HOW TO READ A SCRIPT

Created by Betsy Anne Huggins, Director of Education and Community Engagement



**You don't have to go to a play to experience live theatre.
Pick up a script and bring the theatre to you!**

The front matter of a play often tells you about the copyright rules for the script and who to contact for performance rights. Remember, if you are planning to perform a play for an audience of any size at any price point, including for free, you must contact the agent or publisher to obtain rights for the script. However, if you are reading a play with friends or in a classroom for educational purposes, there is no need to secure rights.

Next, you'll find the cast list. The cast list encompasses every role that would require an assigned actor in a production. If a character is mentioned but doesn't appear or speak onstage, that character won't be in the cast list. Some cast lists have information including physical descriptions, such as gender, race, age, and personality characteristics, that are important when casting the role. Consider this information when casting the script in your group. Encourage actors to perform using their own voice and not an accent; clarity is more important in this reading than an authentic dialect.

Modern playwrights often offer advice on the performance of the script, including how to read or interpret punctuation and other changes in the text. The playwright might intend to help actors develop realistic dialogue or create a sense of alienation through non-naturalistic speech patterns. Reading a script is quite different than reading a book. A novelist indicates that words are spoken out loud by offsetting them with quotation marks. Conversely, a script is meant to be performed out loud, and any words not spoken are offset either in parentheses or in italics.

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While there is no standard format for a script, you'll generally find scripts written in either manuscript or publishing formats. Here are two examples using the opening lines from *Hamlet*.

Manuscript formatting, sometimes called standard playwriting format, looks like this:

	BERNARDO
Who's there?	
	FRANCISCO
Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.	

Character names are center-aligned, and the dialogue is left-aligned beneath the name.

Publishing format typically looks like this:

BERNARDO: Who's there?
FRANCISCO: Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

Character names are left-aligned, and the dialogue follows the name.

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Regardless of what kind of script you're reading, here are some strategies for reading a script in the classroom or with your friends and family.

- Cast the roles and keep it consistent. It's easiest to track a script when one performer is assigned to each character. If you need to break up leading roles among multiple readers, consider always seating that role in the same spot or using other ways to mark that character, such as with a small prop or costume piece.
- Reading a script for the first time is called a "cold read." Cold reads are challenging because actors don't know the full context of their performance. Encourage actors to make their best guess about their character and put full emotion behind their performance. A post-reading discussion can break down any choices that seemed erroneous.
- If possible, seat the group so that everyone can see each other. Theatre is a visual art form, and seeing facial reactions will illuminate the script.
- Acting out particularly exciting moments on your feet is a great way to clarify cause and effect and build the world of the play, but never attempt stage combat without professional support.
- Assign someone to read the stage directions. It is most helpful if they read only the stage directions that describe movement and action onstage (such as "Character exits") and not the "acting notes" that tell an actor how to perform a character (such as "Angrily" or "With excitement"). A script might contain the word "beat," which is often interpreted as a pause. Those directions should be observed by the performers but not read aloud.
- Feel free to pause during the reading to discuss plot, characters, or hazard a guess about what might happen next.

Check out your local library or theatrical publishers, such as Dramatic Publishing, Samuel French, and Playscripts, Inc., for scripts to read. Online resources, such as a playwright's website or *American Theatre* magazine, are also great places to find some of the newest scripts available.