

Stage configurations

Five ways to arrange a space, seen from above. Where the audience sits changes every choice you make.

Proscenium

Audience on one side, looking through a frame.

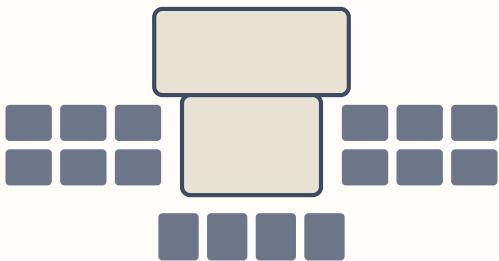


Everything is composed for one viewpoint. The easiest to light and the easiest to hide behind — the fourth wall is intact.

Watch for: playing too far upstage, so the front rows lose you.

Thrust

Audience on three sides, the stage pushing out.

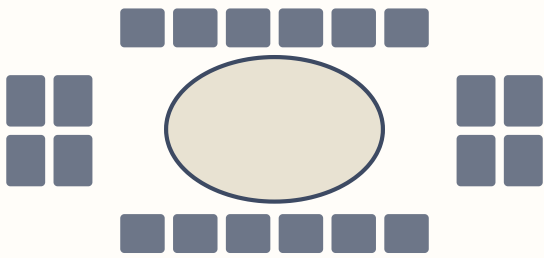


Closer and more exposed. You cannot upstage yourself, and no one position works for all three sides.

Watch for: standing square to the front and giving two sides your shoulder.

In the round

Audience on all four sides.



Nowhere to hide and no backdrop. Keep moving so no section of the audience watches your back for long.

Watch for: entrances — the audience sees you before the scene starts.

Traverse

Audience on two opposite sides, like a catwalk.

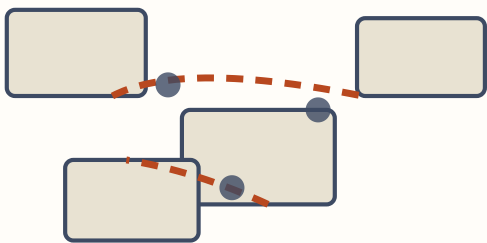


Strong for confrontation — two characters at opposite ends puts the audience between them.

Watch for: long crossings. The middle is a corridor, not a room.

Promenade

No fixed seating. The audience moves between playing spaces.



The space itself does the work. Hard to control sightlines, and every move has to be led.

Watch for: the crowd. Leave time for two hundred people to move.

The performer’s toolkit

Sixteen choices. Naming the one you made is the difference between describing and analysing.

Vocal skills

Pitch

How high or low. Rising pitch reads as tension or a question.

Pace

How fast. Slowing down is the cheapest way to make a line matter.

Pause

The silence you choose. Longer than feels comfortable is usually right.

Volume

How loud — and dropping it can hold a room better than raising it.

Tone

The colour of the voice. Warm, flat, clipped, weary.

Emphasis

Which word carries the weight. Move it and the line means something else.

Accent

Where the character is from. Keep it consistent or leave it alone.

Articulation

How cleanly the consonants land. The back row hears consonants, not vowels.

Physical skills

Posture

How the body is held. It tells the audience status before a word is spoken.

Gesture

What the hands do. Fewer and larger reads better than many and small.

Gait

How the character walks. Age, mood and confidence all live in it.

Facial expression

Readable from the back row, or it is not doing anything.

Eye contact

Who is looked at, and who is avoided. Status again.

Levels

High and low in the space. Height reads as power almost automatically.

Proxemics

The distance between bodies, and what closing it does.

Stillness

Choosing not to move. The strongest thing on stage is often the thing not moving.

The design elements

Five, and each answers a different question for the audience before anybody speaks.

Set

Where and when we are, and how the space can be used.

Ask what it lets actors do, not only what it looks like. A level, a door and an exit change the blocking.

THE WORDS TO USE

levels · entrances · sightlines · naturalistic or abstract · revolve · truck · flats · cyclorama

Lighting

What we see, and how we feel about it.

Colour, intensity, angle and direction. A side light sculpts a face; a downlight isolates.

THE WORDS TO USE

wash · spotlight · gobo · silhouette · fade · snap · blackout · gel · footlight · uplight

Sound

What we hear that no one on stage acknowledges.

Diegetic sound comes from the world of the play. Underscore does not — and the audience should not notice it starting.

THE WORDS TO USE

underscore · diegetic · amplification · reverb · fade in · sting · soundscape · live or recorded

Costume

Who this person is before they speak.

Period, status, occupation and condition. A worn hem says more than a line of dialogue.

THE WORDS TO USE

period · silhouette · fabric · colour palette · condition · accessories · quick change

Props

What a character handles, and what that reveals.

A prop used repeatedly becomes a motif. One handled badly breaks the world instantly.

THE WORDS TO USE

personal prop · set dressing · practical · substitute · motif · handled or ignored

Rehearsal techniques

Six, and what each is actually for. Using one because it is on a list is not a reason.

Still image

The group freezes a moment.

Strips away words so the shape of the relationships is visible. Use it to find the picture before you find the lines.

WHEN

Use it early, and when a scene feels shapeless.

Thought-tracking

A frozen character speaks their private thought aloud.

Separates what a character says from what they mean, which is where most subtext comes from.

WHEN

Use it when a character says one thing and means another.

Hot-seating

The group questions an actor staying in character.

Builds the life that is not in the script. Answers you invent here are what make choices consistent later.

WHEN

Use it when you cannot decide why a character does something.

Cross-cutting

Two scenes intercut, jumping between them.

Sets one moment against another so the audience draws the comparison without being told.

WHEN

Use it when two storylines need to comment on each other.

Marking the moment

The production stops, slows or shifts to flag one beat.

Light, sound, stillness or a change of pace. Use it once — twice and neither lands.

WHEN

Use it on the one beat the whole piece turns on.

Role on the wall

An outline of the character filled with what is known and what is assumed.

Keeps evidence from the text apart from your own invention, which is the distinction an examiner is looking for.

WHEN

Use it at the start of rehearsal, and again when the character shifts.

Write down why you chose a technique at the time you choose it. Reconstructing the reason afterwards is where devising logs go wrong.

Writing about a performance

Four moves. Most answers do the first and stop.

1. What happened

The moment, briefly. One sentence — you are not retelling the play.

In the final scene the older sister crossed downstage and stood with her back to the others.

2. What they did

The technique, named. Vocal, physical or design — be specific about which.

She held the stillness for several seconds while her volume dropped almost to nothing.

3. The effect on me

What it made the audience feel or understand — and say which audience you mean.

The silence pulled the room forward; we had to work to hear her, which made the admission feel private.

4. Why it worked

Link the choice to the meaning of the play. This sentence is the one that separates grades.

Withholding volume at the loudest moment of the plot reversed who held the power in the scene.

THE WORDS THAT TURN DESCRIPTION INTO ANALYSIS

Naming a vocal choice

clipped · measured · faltering · flat · resonant · barely audible · rising · staccato

Naming a physical choice

rigid · loose-limbed · turned away · closed · expansive · tentative · rooted · restless

Naming the effect

unsettling · claustrophobic · tender · abrupt · exposed · relentless · warm · brittle

Linking choice to meaning

which suggested · so that the audience · this positioned us as · reinforcing · in contrast to the earlier

WHAT LOSES MARKS

- ✗ Retelling the plot instead of analysing a moment
- ✗ Naming a technique and never saying what it did
- ✗ Praising the actor rather than the choice
- ✗ “It was really effective” with no technique named
- ✗ Writing about the character as if they were a real person
- ✗ One long paragraph covering the whole performance